J.P. DAS OMNIBUS



Edited by

Paul St-Pierre

This representative selection from the works of J.P. (Jagannath Prasad) Das makes available in English, in a single volume, the best of his work in different genres: poetry, short and long fiction, drama, translation, writing on Orissan art and culture, nonsense verse, and expository prose in the form of talks, interviews and presentations. Often characterised by a strong sense of social engagement, and combining meticulous research with an innovative approach to form, these texts run the gamut from the literary to the academic, from historical fiction to poetry for children, from short explorations of fleeting moments and situations to extended reflections on literature and its function. The world as seen through the eyes of an author who is both a creative writer and a scholar is no longer simply familiar; it becomes an object of reflection and inspection, and readers are introduced to texts and contexts that extend and enrich their intellectual and emotional lives.

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Introduction

Paul St-Pierre

Embedded in the World

I first met Jagannath Prasad Das in the mid-1990s. He was described to me at the time, with admiration, as something of a 'hero' – less for what he had written, than for having given up a coveted civil-service job to become a writer. This was the image of J.P. shared by many in Odisha, and it is interesting in that it raises the question—one that he himself has addressed at various times and in different places—of the relation between authors and their multiple worlds: the worlds they inhabit, and the worlds they create. Must a writer give up the first for the second? The variations on the response to this question would probably be as numerous and as different as there are writers, and in the case of J.P. the answer is interestingly complex. On the one hand he abandoned the world of his original profession and its goals to devote himself to writing; indeed, in "Authorspeak", included in this volume, he talks of how being in the IAS had made writing impossible for him; yet, he also refers to himself as a "Sunday writer"—writing only occasionally, on those days not devoted to more pressing tasks. This then is the paradox of many writers' ambivalent relation towards their craft: writing can engulf their lives and eclipse all else, while at other moments it can be relegated to a secondary, almost negligible role. This is due less to the competition between two opposing forces vying for supremacy than the result of the vagaries of time: embraced in a dialectic, life and craft feed, and feed off, each other. Thus the writing itself—the poems, plays and prose, as well as the more erudite and didactic texts—are very much of a piece with the world; lived

reality and imagined universes constantly impinge on each other: fictions find their basis in real people and in history, poems bear witness to actual events. In the process people, history, and events—the raw material of reality—are aesthetically transformed, affectively heightened, given meaning, emotion and form. In the works of J.P. Das the worlds of the author are not kept apart; they are brought into contact and inform each other. In this transformation, the writer infuses our shared experiences with a particular significance, questioning the nature of our existence in a world that can produce and accept senseless slaughter, famine, pain and poverty, but also examining the ways in which we relate—equivocally, tentatively, egoistically, absolutely—to those we admire and love, as well as to those with whom our contact is more fleeting.

The poems, short stories, nonsense verse, plays and the excerpt from *A Time Elsewhere* included here were all originally written in Odia. Their translation into English is the result of many hands and of multiple collaborations; in a large number of cases, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, involving the author himself. Although perfectly at home in Hindi, Bangla and English, languages in which he spends a large part of his time and which mark the different topographies of his world, J.P. as a writer remains very much immersed in the history, culture, and reality of Odisha, completely committed to his mother tongue. His creative writing has always been in Odia, and much of his writing in English (see the sections devoted to his essays, his writings on art, his translations and to the interviews he has given) relates directly to Odisha.

The volume is organised into eight sections, each devoted to a particular form. In the first, twenty-eight poems are presented in chronological order, beginning with "Mask", included in *First Person* in 1976, and ending with "Country", published in *The Little Magazine* in 2009. "Mask" establishes a theme that recurs throughout the poetry of J.P. Das: the theme of disguises and unmasking, in which the two are not and cannot be strictly opposed since there is no possibility of a final underlying truth or absolute knowledge. It is, rather, the *search*

for self, for self-knowledge, for the desired other, and the possibility of bearing witness to reality that remain essential. The thematic evolution in this section—from a personal quest to larger questions relating to the nature of truth, power, and politics—gives a sense of the wide range of occasions for poetry to be found in the poet's work.

Eleven short stories—a small but representative selection from among the more than seventy published in English translations—are included in Section II, along with an excerpt from the first chapter of *A Time Elsewhere*, an historical novel portraying a turbulent fifty-year period beginning in 1859 in Odisha. The stories touch on a variety of topics, from the demands, rewards, and at times unexpected power of poetry, to more directly social issues, such as caste, arranged marriages, ageing and communal violence. All are treated with a certain degree of irony, many with humour, and at times the tone becomes more openly satirical, as when a reporter returns to a village after a natural disaster only to find that normality has returned and that the village is no longer newsworthy, or when the folk culture of a village is hijacked in an ill-advised attempt to restore and preserve it. In three stories ironic reversals take place; social expectations are not met; and the narratives open on to new possibilities, unexpected relationships, and previously unimagined ways of being in the world.

The excerpt from *A Time Elsewhere* [Desh Kaal Patra] is taken from the first pages of the novel and deftly sets the scene for all that is to follow. It is December 1859 and Birakeshari, the king of Puri, is about to breathe his last. Before he does so he adopts the son of the raja of Khemandi as his successor and heir, and names his wife, Suryamani, responsible for the management of the temple of Jagannath. All of this takes place in secrecy, in an attempt to avoid palace intrigue—but intrigue will occupy centre stage of the novel and play itself out against the backdrop of Odisha's transition into modernity under the moral and literary leadership of the likes of Radhanath Ray, Fakirmohan Senapati and Gourishankar Ray.

The third section is devoted to three of the author's six plays: a speech from his first, *Before the Sunset*; Act I, Scene I of *Sundardas*, a play based on historical fact and personages, set in early nineteenth-

century Odisha; and *Made for Each Other*, a one-act play presented here in its entirety. In the first, in a variation on the theme of the effects of time and the possibility for self-delusion, the main character Deepankar expresses his regret at having betrayed his early love for theatre for more 'serious' preoccupations, resolving to remedy his error on this, his fortieth birthday, thus setting into motion his own unmasking as a fraud. *Sundardas* also dramatises the question of the nature of truth, through the historical religious figure of Sundardas and his relations with both Hindus of different castes and the recently arrived Christian missionaries. Drawing on real-life characters and practices, the play is a meditation on questions of identity and tolerance, and on the role of religion and of religious institutions in society. Finally, *Made for Each Other* satirises the institution of arranged marriages. In an attempt to undermine the plans being made for them, Pratibha and Devdutt go to great—and absurd—lengths to present to each other and to their future in-laws as undesirable an image of themselves as possible.

Section IV comprises the nonsense verse originally published in *Alimalika* (1993; English translation, 2004). Characterised by a sense of play, all the more impressive since these are the author's own virtuoso translations from Odia, the poems are exercises in form and, as such, pure poetry. Rhymes occur across languages ("The haughty Prof. Pal D./Wanted everything jaldi;/Ever in despair/He'd tear his hair/In no time became a baldy"); animals speak in different tongues, dogs mirroring their masters ("The lapdog said, bow-wow/His sahib said, now now!/The pidog said, bhoh bhoh,/His babu said, oh, ho!"); cultures intermix ("I like Ryan, Meg,/I like a chicken leg,/But what I really like/Is a proper Patiala peg")—all the more an admixture in this last case since the poem's title, "Ike, Never", alludes to the slogan—"I Like Ike"—used in the election of Eisenhower as president of the United States. The humorous tone of the poems, their ludic nature and formal qualities will appeal to readers of all ages.

Three essays make up Section V. In the first, "The Poet and Society", the argument is put forward that while poetry does indeed perform a social function any attempt to reduce it to that alone

leads—as in the case of much patriotic verse—to poetry of indifferent quality. Nevertheless, poets do have a responsibility to society, one that consists in bearing witness rather than in providing solutions. This vision of the role of the poet is in a sense exemplified by the lives and works of the two very different writers presented in the following two essays. The essay on Fakirmohan Senapati shows how the history of Odisha in the nineteenth century played an important role both in the life of Fakirmohan—he was actively involved in many of the important issues of his times—and in his writings: through the shift in his use of language, from more Sanskritized Odia to a form of language that was more locally based and colloquial, and through his willingness to bring the different social groups—the British, but also Odias themselves—under critical scrutiny. The third essay in this section is devoted to the short life (1901–1938) and works of Kuntala Kumari Sabat, certain of whose early poems were very successful in Odisha, but whose life was marked by frustration and ended in delusion.

The section that follows provides excerpts from two works on the art of Odisha, presenting yet another side of the author's varied interests. "Decline and Revival of Puri Paintings" has a strong narrative thread, with a number of protagonists (the artists, but also an American Quaker), a plot (the decline and revival in question), and a successful dénouement, with the renewed recognition the craft receives. The historical materials are successfully mustered into a compelling story, skillfully told. The second text, "Palm-leaf Art", is more technical in nature, demonstrating another facet of the author's personality: precise attention to detail. The text explains the difficulties inherent to the medium itself (the shape and nature of the palm leaf, the use of the stylus, the application of colour), as well as those brought by new technologies (printing) and by 'modern' themes and forms in Oriya literature.

Section VII of the volume contains two speeches and two interviews. The first of these is the acceptance speech for the prestigious Saraswati Samman, awarded in 2006. This text is important since in it the author 'speaks' directly about the major

themes and considerations that have dominated his writing: the relation of writers to their readers and critics, the function of the writer and the relation of literature to society, the importance of continuing to write in the bhashas, the difficult and arduous nature of writing. The other texts elaborate more fully on these concerns. In "Authorspeak" the focus is once again on the relation of an author's work to society. Questions of location and language are also important; although established in Delhi, J.P. continues to write in Odia. This is a question of cultural roots and of readership, most certainly, but it is also a conscious political act at a time when literature by bhasha writers is routinely undervalued. The two interviews included in this section focus on poetry, in the first instance, and on *A Time Elsewhere*, in the second, reiterating themes addressed in other texts.

The final section includes selections from the translations into English 'authored' by J.P. – from Odia, Bangla, Urdu, and French. The texts range from the historically important (the Odia Lakshmi Purana, as well as the 1866 essay from *Utkal Deepika* "Dear Oriyas, Rise!") to the modern, on questions of caste (Basudev Sunani), of the position of women within society (Taslima Nasreen), and of violence and political mayhem (Gulzar). The translations from French were carried out with the collaboration of the author, Cathérine Clément, a noted French philosopher and public intellectual with numerous works on India.

I began this introduction with J.P. Das the 'hero'; I hope to have convinced readers of the value, importance, and diversity of Jagannath Prasad Das the 'writer'. Dispassionate but not passionless, a close observer both of himself and of the world, a writer whose interests include a wide range of genres, a creative mind but also a scholar, a writer with a social conscience—this collection of the writings of Jagannath Prasad Das shows him to be all of these, and more.

Contents

POEMS

I

The Mask

I treasure many masks: for day and night
and evening; for a moment of happiness;
for the last act of the tragedy;
for guest and fellow-traveller, one time lover
and her husband, emperor, soldier and whore;
for the sorcerer and the funeral procession;
for exiled sky and startled dawn;
for love and for deceiving; for defense.
Holding different masks over my face,
I change disguises for every phase of life.

I sought a mask, in the scant blue
of my own eyes, that would make maidens fall
under my spell, sensing the slight firmness
of my lips. Enemies would acknowledge defeat; at a glance,
every bird in the sky would wing into my snare;
I'd call for night, and the sun would drop.

That mask was never found; all masks of mine
are only small surprises, trivial smiles,
morbid pleasure and sullen arrogance,
feeble cries, impotent anger; my masks are merely

a little love and parting's common grief–
under these masks, I know, I honor guests,
recite *mantras*, make love to wife and mistress,
speak with the skies, watch the stars,
and lose myself easily in a throng of people.

And my age increases from one mask to the other,
from one deceit to another.
From the depths of disguise, some try
to recognize me, while others
who know me behave as strangers;
if at times I lose my identity,
I try to find myself, I look at walls;
masks lined up row after row,
and bits of scattered broken glass–
it is meaningless to question a mirror.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

2

The Dream

In a dream, I saw last night a dove fly down
and place a colored flower in my hand.

Around my bed my countless desires
slept huddled together,
waking, like rows of girls,
and falling asleep again; night thickened
around the profusion of leaves and in the owl's eyes.

While the bird stared at me
from a branch of some tree, I imagined it
suddenly growing huge as a *garuda,*
rushing at me, trying to claw my eyes.

So I searched for the moon behind the hill:
so many hills, twisted and crumbling;
jostled trees, broken rock, and, beyond
the temples' pinnacle, the silence
of centuries in the colorless sky;
the moon like an adze. One by one
the morning's stars went on committing suicide.

And I saw again a forest of flowers:
vines like snakes, petals shaped like tongues.
The loneliness stifles whatever little light
of night crawls into the many hollows of the earth–
the flowers black, the butterflies
everywhere silent and dead.

Hands bloom like flowers
amid swarms of birds; all night
I seek myself
in another's dream.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

3

The Corpse

Someone's lifeless body lies in the street
surrounded by people.
Many simply walk past,
others cannot bear to look at it;
one's step falters, another falls silent,
and another shuts his eyes at the sight.

One passes by reciting *mantras* along the street;
for whom did this child pluck flowers?
Who laughed here,
who stretched out his arms
to put a halt to time,
and whose screams were lost
in the deserted street?

In the light's rush upstream,
someone was lost on the way; the heart's
many dreams were ground to ash.
Someone sighs deeply.
Someone measures out life
with a burning candle,
and another finds his own way
in the half-light.
The people have all gone;

the street is deserted, laughter extinguished
in the endlessness of space.
The corpse still lies in the middle of the street,
and I lie fast asleep on a lonely isle.

Translation: Jayanta Mahapatra

4

Goddess

You appear in the vacant
moment of midnight,
you are the ordained goddess
of my secret yearnings,
of my blood and veins,
of my flesh and body.
Your throne is all my helpless wishes,
your temple-columns my defeated desires.
In the dreadful hour of nightmares,
you are installed.
In the forbidden city lanes
you are worshipped.
Your chants echo and re-echo
in auction cries of slave markets.

This is the last night of my waiting;
in the last act the hero is killed,
all your familiar lovers have fled.
No priest in the temple,
no waves in the ocean;
nothing is left of smiles and moonlight,
the temple arena is empty;

everything is quiet today;
tonight there is no one at all.
I wait for you and pace up and down
the portals of your presence, all alone;
look, I am your last samurai.

Let your conference with the dead end.
Come to my dreams
with your tinkling silver bells.
Let everything be extinct today;
let the temple be razed to dust.
Let the nights burn away in body's pyre.
Let darkness of sight,
sound, shape engulf everything.
Let your hands be octopus and crush me.
Let your feet be a pillory and clasp me.
Let the ten petals of my palms be gashed
by the cactus of your breasts.
Let your body be quicksand and devour me.

Translation: Deba Patnaik

5

At the Stroke of Six

You made a promise
we'll meet at the stroke of six,
at six in the evening and none but us,
the two of us at the city limits,
the evening would be just for us
and time would stop sharp at six.

When you went to the sea-beach
with someone the other day
the sun set suddenly;
the mermaids got frightened;
castaway ships stalled in midocean;
the waters flamed like fire
and flowed blood red;
I was robbed of my time
and then on my sick-bed from dawn
to dusk and dusk to dawn,
in my fevered sleep,
there were no dreams
and no memories for me.

There will be evenings yet
and there will yet be you,
with the sunshine of
silent mornings in your breast,
your arms aching with midday's pain,
your body besieged with
the mysteries of darkest night,
your eyes twitching
to the excitement of traffic lights.
Would you look for me
on evenings like these,
with your hand on your breast,
cravingly on your dishevelled bed?

This evening,
there will be sacrifices yet;
battles and bloodshed;
a dagger in the lover's hand
a scream on the heroine's lips.
There will be death for this evening
and resurrection too;
some making up
and some suicide pacts,
on this anniversary of
the beginning and end of love.

You made a promise
we'll meet at six,
at the stroke of six
the two of us,
just we two in the lonely evening,
as if it were the last day of our lives
and there is to be no redemption tomorrow.

But look,
how hostile everything is!
The sky has turned crimson;
there is a strike in the city;
protests and processions,
there are prohibitory orders against us;
the city limits are oddly crowded today;
the clocks have all stopped at noon.

Only you and me here,
it's six in the evening;
only you and me
and the city's awe-struck populace.

Translation: The Poet

6

Looking for Myself

Looking for myself
I know I'll meet you some day,
suddenly close to me.
Not much will be left of the night,
the imagined distance between
the need for you and your proximity
will be nonexistent,
all my search and endeavour
will end surprisingly.

Everything will be in a shambles,
with layers of dust and cobwebs,
the sky riveted to the walls,
the room littered with torn letters,
my legs tired, my hands inert,
with winter in my body,
and desert fire in my head,
warm blood staining the sheets,
my breathing feeble at the final hours.
But there will be you by me side,
incarnate in my whole being,
your body stretched out on my neutral bed.

There is hurricane in your every breath,
lightning in your every touch,
your mouth is a volcano
and each kiss its explosion,
each curve of the body
dreadful tides of the ocean,
your eyes flashing the revolt
of ejected meteors.
I will forget everything
and leave my house
without a forwarding address.
I will search for myself again
on the outskirts of the cremation grounds,
amidst penitent hermits
and in the desexed existence
of passionless celibates.

I'll go from one pilgrimage to another;
I'll be engrossed in the contemplation
of nabhi padma kundalini and brahma;
I'll renounce in the Triveni waters
the last props of my existence.

With rejected love letters in my hand,
shrivelled flowers
and a photograph of the dead,
I'll be looking for myself,
all alone on many a road,
the blood of the first sun
spilling on the tarmac,
the sky's cadaver lying
on the cremation ground,
rows of empty houses weeping
on both sides of the unending road,

the horizon silent and the winds riveted
to trees and dry branches.

In those weary last moments
I'll meet you again in such loneliness
while I deceive a little and comfort some
in my irate duality.

Translation: The Poet

7

Six Hours

The six hours spent with you
were squeezed into the cyclops eye
of the train engine,
then vanished in the lonesome dark.

What fraction of time are six hours?
Can they be stretched?
Who can confine in a train compartment
compressed relationships?
For that matter,
how can darkness be nailed to the tree?
The wide island of angry clouds
awakened with a single call?
Or the intimate moon plucked out
from the blankets of winter mist?

The six hours will return
gathering themselves in a self-confidence
like escapeless echoes.
The six seasons will come back
from the death defying valleys of love
to the dream islands

on estuaries of fairy tales.
Where will you then go away
with the rains in your eyes?
I'll find you easily
in the ashes of dead stars.
I'll gather you from
the winter-tipped dew drops of memory.
I'll search you out
amid the weird vestiges of nightmares.
All the pathways of my search
would converge on the precipice of your body.
Wherever you choose to descend,
I'll be waiting for you there.

When the abstract darkness
gets busy talking to the dreams,
we'd take the last train
to the valley of the stars.

Translation: The Poet

8

Flight

In my flight
to the future,
if you trap me
in the memories
of our past,
from which
there is no escape,
who shall I pledge
my present to?

Translation: The Poet

9

Truth

No other knowledge
is expedient here
except your casual passion,
which is a supreme truth.

No other precept
is relevant here,
except your active indifference,
which is
another supreme truth.

Translation: The Poet

10

Sequence

The morning calls up the noon
which blots out
the memory-laden words
from the depth of passion,
undressing dreams
in an accepted truth.

The noon calls up the evening,
where thoughts cease,
leaving only a grey sky
of limitless love
and an eternal dusk.

The evening calls up the night,
where isolated agonies
stretch empty moments to eternity,
turning love into
time made articulate.

Translation: The Poet

11

Omens

The compulsions of your smile
tire out the city
in grey loneliness.

In the chorus of your words,
shadows climb down the trees
and silence the murmur
of the leaves.

The cold touch of your hand
spirits away
the intimacy of dew drops
from the grass.

Your unseeing glance
burns down the dreams
of the horizon.

Your hesitation to be
yourself to me,
spreads some more wilderness
in my dark despairs
reflected in the skies.

Translation: The Poet

12

Mahabharat

It is not possible
to live in exile
and don a disguise
for all times;
one has to return
to one's own land.

It is not possible
to remain neutral,
for here,
war is inevitable
and one has no choice
but to take a side.

Here, in the epic of life
all is written down:
for empire and power
the loaded dice of elections;
for the destitute,
a piece of land
as large as the tip of a needle
under the Land Reforms law;
lac-houses of harijan colonies,
war-zones of farms and factories;

the chakravyuha of poverty and want,
the unfailing brahmastras
in the armoury of adversaries;
and the disrobed helplessness
of the lowliest and lost.

In diplomatic exchanges,
no principles are at stake.
The old and the venerable
beseech from the young
the inheritance of youth.
Honour is surrendered
in the fulfilment
of unjust promises.
There is assault and rape
in meeting halls.
Witnesses go blind.
Chastity is made divisible.
Licence and lust
are universally acknowledged.
Woman is mere womb here,
perfidy is routine
and might the only right.

In the dharmakshetra of everyday life,
the siren is veritably
the blow of the conchshell
that sounds the beginning of war.
The evening does not, alas,
bring its cessation;
it's only a respite
to regroup artifices
for the battle next day.
It is a war
bereft of all principles.
In this war,
to lose is the only sin.

Translation: The Poet

13

Kalahandi

Put away the road maps now.
To go there,
you do not need
helicopters any more;
wherever there is hunger,
there Kalahandi is.

The god of rain
turned away his face.
There was not one green leaf
left on the trees to eat.
The whole village a graveyard.
The ground cracked;
river sand dried up.
All the plans failed;
the poverty line
receded further.

Wherever you look,
there is a Kalahandi:
in the sunken eyes
of living skeletons,
in rags which do not
cover the frail bodies,

in the utensils
pawned off for food,
in the crumbling huts
with unthatched roofs,
in the exclusive prosperity
of having owned
two earthen pots.

Kalahandi is everywhere:
in the gathering of famished crowds
before charity kitchens,
in market places
where children are auctioned off,
in the sighs of young girls
sold to brothels,
in the silent procession
of helpless people
leaving their hearth and home.

Come, look at Kalahandi closer;
in the crocodile tears
of false press statements,
in the exaggerated statistics
of computer print-outs,
in the cheap sympathies
doled out at conferences,
and in the false assurances
presented by planners.

Kalahandi is very close to us:
in the occasional contrition
of our souls,
in the unexpected nagging of conscience,
in the rare repentance
of the inner self,
in the nightmares
appearing through sound sleep,
in disease, in hunger,

in helplessness,
in the abject fear
of an impending bloodshed.

How could we then walk
into the celebrated portals
of the twenty-first century,
leaving Kalahandi behind?

Translation: The Poet

14

Fear

Fear is the prehistoric darkness
lurking in the lanes
and by-lanes of the city
when you have fifty thousand rupees
in your briefcase.

Fear is the offspring
of King Kong
who emerges from childhood fables
and beats his chest
on the roof of the concrete jungle.

Fear is the ring of the telephone
hammering the heart
in the voice of the dreaded boss
at odd hours.

Fear is the telegram
at midnight
which arrives
inside a closed envelope
when the near and the dear ones
are far away.
In the still midday,
fear is the thumping in unison
of heavy boots

in times of curfew
in the lanes of impotent men.

Fear is the hushed whisper
of tense and uneasy days
when uniformed soldiers
armed with bayonets
charge into processions
after slogans of protest
have gone silent.

Fear is the roaring
of the motorbike
emerging from the temple
with a masked face
when names have been entered
on the hit list.

Fear is the witness
of your ignominious past
surfacing suddenly in the mind
back from banishment
looking for atonement
for the sins of the yesteryears.

Fear is the imminent
possibility of death,
leaping out of the mirror,
when vacant moments of time
draw wrinkles on the face
at the indulgent moments
before the dressing table.

Fear is the tenuousness
of relationship that hangs
from the everyday discordance
eternally afraid
of snapping itself.

Translation: Hrushikesh Panda

15

Kalinga

The day gallops away
riding on horseback
over the dilapidated
rocks of Dhauli hills.
The invisible hands of Time
chronicle across the skies
the ironies of history.

Layers of legend
lie strewn across the landscape.
The fading rock-edicts
keep repeating the arrogance
of a doubtful victory.
The ancient red earth
connects one age with another.

As the echo of the last conch shell
is drowned in the wind,
the peak of the hill
puts an end
to the strategies of devastation.
The tiny flower in the shrub
lifts its head
like a veritable victor.

The silent waters of the river Daya
flow like blood.
The trees, mute witnesses,
point to the east
with their new branches.

No one wins,
no one loses.
At the break of the dawn,
weary warriors move on
to the humdrum battlefield
of their daily grind.

Leaving Kalinga behind,
wrapped in a legend,
wearing a monk's habit,
Ashoka walks towards
his own nirvana.

Translation: The Poet

16

Woman

With her long dark hair
she knitted sweaters
for each one of her kin.

She fed everyone
of her family
from her own share,
going hungry herself.

She surrendered her face
and bosom to bear the assaults
of cruel hands and sharp nails.

She gave away
each limb of her body
to prop up her fragile home.

And said at last,
apologizing profusely,
that she was sorry
she had nothing more to offer.

Translation: The Poet

17

My World

My small world
lies suspended between
the four walls of your house.
There is a no entry sign,
yet my life, leashed to it,
keeps moving endless
round and round.

From wherever I start
I reach your house,
sure as death,
as though all roads lead
to this single destination.

It's easy to find it –
on the front lawn
winter sleeps at noon
as the spotless day
dries in the sun
like your cast-off sari.
Your pet clouds lounge
high up on the roof.
In the night,
the house is snow-clad

in mysteries.
Moonlight peeps out
through the open window,
and I know
when the other window opens,
there will be sunshine.

From my look-out
I fix my eyes on the house
and invoke you
in the ultimate measure
of my meditation.
My prayers stop at the edges
of your unmade bed,
wet memories overflow my senses;
a taste of the sea assails me;
my conscious becomes a dream
and loses all its reason.

I see blazing heaps of sand,
and your body seething
in the sultry summer heat,
I see a storm gather
and pass over the desert,
and then I see
your dishevelled sari
lying forlorn
along your undulated shores.

I see you through my many
states and aberrations –
you are the sum total
of my entire life,
its beginning, middle and end;
the three measures of time
and the four directions;
the five elements, the six seasons,
and the seven heavens;

the ten misfortunes
and the fourteen worlds.

Your house is all I have,
movable or immovable,
and I know I am destined,
like an accursed soul,
to circle it round and round
now and for ever.

Translation: Poet with Paul St-Pierre

18

Sanctuary

I have no home;
I have no address.
My life is a continuous
search for refuge
in your remote continent,
where my wanderings
have torn my existence
to discrete pieces
and scattered them
among the many paradoxes
of my growing up.

Sheltered in your tresses
I have seen the night nestling there
charging with its myriad stars
the dense gloom of despair.

Hiding behind your eyes
I have seen dreams float by
towards the shores of fulfilment
consoling along the way
the wild waves of discontent.

Perched on your lucid lips
I have listened to
chants of Vedic hymns
intoned with effortless ease
bringing dead alphabets to life.

From the formidable forts
of your resolute breasts
I have seen the ironies of history
bring blossoms of promise
to the wastelands of time.

On the fertile shores
of your earnest thighs
I have seen primeval galaxies
in their progenitive pride
projecting complete constellations
into the firmament of the future.

Prostrate at your feet
I have seen the century
devastated by the anguish
of its previous birth
and its atomic fragments
pouring out of the navel
of the penitent past
and seeking nirvana
in the pores of your body.

Translation: Poet with Paul St-Pierre

19

At the Traffic Lights

The car moves on
smooth and well-regulated
in its mechanical perfection.
But when the traffic light
glares with its red eye,
the dream jerks to a halt;
the engine growls
with irritation.
The impatient car behind
keeps on honking
as if it wants to make it
into the next century
beyond the crossing.
Waiting behind the wheel
the bored eyes
seek out comic relief
in the bizarre sculpture
of the accident-prone car
and its chauffeur's monkey-face.
One tries to read
the headlines of the tabloid
held out at the car door,
but there is nothing
sensational there
except the face of the newsboy.

Suddenly there advances
into the rear-view mirror
a skeleton with a dead child
in its bony hands;
its screaming fingers
pierce the steel
and wipe off the daydream.
It shatters the easy equipoise,
it takes you,
in a moment,
to the perilous precipice
of your conscience
making you, all of a sudden,
think of fate and God,
and brings to your lips
lines of a forgotten prayer.

The traffic light lowers
its benevolent eyes.
The car anxiously jumps forward
wishing to get lost
in the traffic rush.
But the image
of the skeleton
refuses to leave
the rear view mirror
until the next crossing.

Translation: The Poet

20

Meaning of Poetry

People often ask about
the meaning of poetry –
even they who won't touch
poetry with a bargepole.
But then no one bothers to ask
about the meaning of Time
or the definition of Love,
or about the purport of Life.

It's for sure, as someone said,
that no one reads poetry –
neither fishmonger nor chief minister
neither publisher nor professor.
It's also well-known
that these people are totally
unconcerned about
the rainbow and the butterfly,
about the patter of rain
and the smell of earth.

It is equally well-known
That poetry does not bring revolution.
It does not give bread to the hungry.
It cannot stop police bullets.

Poetry does not even
give a lesson in morality.
If that had been the poet's aim,
he would have taken to the streets
a gun, not a pen, in his hand.
He would have raised battle-cries
and instead of writing poems
he would have coined slogans
and formulated morals.

Even they who read books
usually keep away from poetry.
However, there still are
some moon-struck people
who do read poetry.
They read a poem and create it too
along with the poet,
and breathe life into it.

A poem is only for him
who, without understanding it
in a first reading,
bravely gives it a second try.

The meaning of a poem
is only that much
which, through doubts and incomprehension,
crosses the frontiers of the eyes
and enters the innermost recesses
of the reader's mind.
The poem's reason for being
is only that which one understands
through its ambiguity and obscurity
and nothing more.

A poem is somewhat like love
or like time, if you please,
it's fulfilled in itself.

A poem demands nothing,
it does not aspire for anything.
It is its own trial and realization;
its own content and expanse;
its own relevance and justification.
The poet, himself self-created,
creates its meaning
and also its obscurity.

A poem happens
beyond figures of speech,
beyond simile and metaphor.
A poem is above grammar and spelling
and punctuation marks.
It is free from the tyranny
of professors, critics,
theorists and interpreters.
A poem exists in its own sovereign land,
itself its lord and master.

No one reads poetry,
not even she
for whom the poem was written.
One might then say
that poetry is of no consequence
and has no relevance to life.
That's true.
But then,
come to think of it,
what is life itself
but a few obscure lines
of some stray poem?

Translation: The Poet

21

Devi

Your whereabouts
are unknown to me;
you are far away
is all I know.
You are like
the Supreme Being,
you are everyone's;
mine alone
you will never be.

You are the ordained goddess.
In the fragrance
of incense and camphor,
you are the luminescence
of offerings and prayer;
in the rising crescendo
of sacred hymns,
you are the divine joy
of deliverance.
For the penitent
prostrate at your feet
you are the precious boon
bouncing off your
many flashing weapons;

for the ardent acolyte
who has never set eyes on you,
you are the bond between
this and the other world.

You are the letter box
and the dead letter office;
you are all the letters
written for you
and their torn drafts;
you are the wrong addresses
where the letters cannot reach.

In the close confines
of domestic happiness
in the living room,
with relatives and pet dog,
you are the family's tradition
and also a wild exception
to its suffocating mores.

You are the deathly discomfort
of disturbing words
tormenting the innermost mind;
you are the pointed meanings
of an abstruse poem;
you are the life-giving balm
of the prayers which hurt;
you are the unique irony
of the many sufferings
not spoken of in the poems
written in your honour.

You are the benediction
of a displeased goddess;
you are the wrong address
on an unwritten letter;
you are the intimacy

of an empty house;
you are the simple meaning
difficult to grasp.

How can I find you –
in which house, which temple,
which post office,
what book of poems,
within what limits
of how many worlds?
And on whose dreams
shall I trespass
to ever find you?

Translation: Poet with Paul St-Pierre

22

Curfew in the City

With nostalgia in my heart
and longing in my eyes,
I dream of my city.
I cross the river of my innocence
and take the road to my childhood;
I stop at the crossroads of growing up
and make my way
to the city of my happy memories.

Addresses written in familiar hands
show me the way,
friendly faces beckon me;
fragments of memories
nudge me on.
And, there, suddenly before me
is the city of my dreams.

But everything seems strange
in the city I knew so well.
Everything seems to be in ruins;
the roads deserted,
the houses dejected and forlorn.
There is no warmth
in the crowd of posters;

no invitation in the peeling walls.
I come face to face
with the harsh ironies
lying in wait for me.

Unwanted sights crowd around me:
friendly knocks rebuffed
on the neighbour's door;
thirst returning from the dry tap;
childhood crying on its way
to an orphan future;
modesty hiding her tears in shame;
innocence caught between flying bullets;
amity falling down in pieces
from the broken domes.

The day retreats in disgrace;
night comes weeping
in the completeness of its shame.
Bewildered, I look at faith
stuck on the knife's edge,
dharma blasted in explosions,
conscience drowned in blood,
and justice burnt down in arson.

I have dream in my eyes,
there is a city in my dreams,
and, there is a curfew in the city.

Translation: The Poet

23

Archaeology

History by his side,
the researcher stands
upon the arid expanse of time
rummaging through ruins
for signs from the past:
temple crests hidden under sand,
flowers fallen from idol's hands,
expeditions ordered in dreams,
snakes guarding the sleeping boy,
hoof prints of galloping horses,
jingling anklets stilled in the river,
signet rings in the fish's belly,
mementos to identify strangers.

He looks around,
his mind beset with questions –
when where why whose,
coronation, reign, war, ashvamedha,
proclamations, bequests, genealogy.
No one answers,
There are no clues.
The questions run about
from place to place

in the barren expanses
like deserters fleeing battle fields.

When he repeats the questions,
a hideous laughter
from the thirsting souls
of commoners
comes out from the caves
and the coves
and from the recesses
of the horizon
knocking against stones,
trees and the void.

Its wandering echo now orders
the sky to turn its face,
the mountain to go to sleep,
The forest to close its eyes,
and tells History,
Shut up, liar!

Translation: The Poet

24

Gandhi

The experiments with truth
turned into slogans.
The philosophy of life
remained stuck
to the blind eyes of statues.
Success remained confined
to mere definitions.
The soul was taken over
by the gross merchandise
of opportunism.

For the establishment of dharma
war was declared.
For maintaining peace
bustees of dalits were burnt.
With the support
of devious scriptures
truth was asked
to prove itself.
The men of god
were made outcastes.
The lowliest of low
moved even further down.
There is no one now

to search for truth;
no one is bothered
about the means any more.
Everyone has his eye
on counterfeit results.
In the profit and loss
of black markets
the last capital of goodness
was squandered away.
Imperialists marched on
in search of new colonies.
Awards for peace
were bestowed on war-mongers.

The old pocket watch
cannot keep track
of the lines of poverty.
The horrors of truth
cannot be seen through
the thick pair of glasses.
The small piece of loin cloth
cannot hide the vulgarity
of limitless power.
The walking stick cannot stop
the aggressive violence
of extremists.

When the clocks fall silent
and their hands move no more,
when history takes leave,
he would come out yet again
from the confines of statues,
movies and anniversaries
and take another long stride
towards the raised guns
of a new breed of assassins.

Translation: The Poet

25

Historical Truth

History is nothing
but a piece of rant;
there is no such thing
as a historical truth.
Might owns right
as also history.
You engrave someone's name
on a stone slab
and he is the rightful owner
till the letters are erased.

History is a fossil
of primeval time,
its elements made out
of broken swords,
crumbling skulls,
shattered idols,
undeciphered alphabets
and scraps of paper strewn
across the archives floor.
And all these shuffled
and made to serve

any which way you like.

History can be picked up
from the ground
like a coveted crown
with the tip of the sword.
History can be auctioned
and given away
to the highest bidder.
History can be consigned
to the blazing flames
like a flimsy effigy
by a frenzied mob.
The purohit can proffer it
into sacrificial fire.
History may get lost
in the labyrinths
of conflicting interests.

There is no such thing
as the final truth
of history.
Like a quick change artist
it changes its
colour and countenance.
Anything can be proven
and established
by false evidence,
fake records,
cryptic signs and symbols.
A stone statue can be proven
to be a figure of straw.
A mosque to be a temple,
a temple a stupa;
a hero a jester and villain.

History has no truth to it,
it has no form of its own.
When you take away
from its face
layer after layer
of falsehoods,
you will only discover
that there is yet
another mask behind it.

Translation: The Poet

26

The Daffodil

Neither the teacher
in the classroom
nor his confounded pupil,
nor the westward-looking scholar
has ever seen it with his mortal eyes;
yet the daffodil,
fluttering and dancing
in the breeze
in its golden arrogance,
flashes upon their inward eye.

The empire may have perished
like a short spring,
but the daffodil lives on.
The empire may have dried up
like the rain
or as the pearls of dew,
but the daffodil lives on
tossing its head
in a sprightly dance.

As lively and fresh now
as in the golden age of imperialism,
its glory remains untarnished

in the ruins of the empire.
In the emptiness of lands
ravaged by cultural invasions,
the daffodil shines and twinkles
like an eternal star.

Through the open windows of the mind
winds of subculture
from upstart foreign lands
rush in and blow us off our feet.
The daffodil shines as ever before
in its shameless arrogance
in the inward eyes
of our very own intellectuals.

Translation: The Poet

27

After Gujarat

After Gujarat,
will there be poetry?
Was it possible
to write poetry
After Alexandria was burnt down?
After Auschwitz,
after Hiroshima and Vietnam,
after the Emergency
and Babri masjid,
after 9/11 and Iraq?

Its not possible
to banish poetry.
Poetry comes back effortless
to Plato's republic,
to Stalin's Siberia,
to Pokhran and Kalahandi.
Poetry follows
the footprints of violence
as it chronicles
the descent of man.
Like history
poetry has no end.

Poetry is written
despite fatwa and bans.
Poetry laughs at Gulag,
ignores the censor's blue pencil
and the fundamentalist's frown.
Poetry is written
against the backdrop
of bonfire of books.

After Gujarat
there will be poetry
about Gujarat itself.
It will begin
with the shame of Ayodhya,
and track the bloody trail
to Godhra to Gujarat,
on to Mumbai.

When Babri rises again,
poetry will affirm
that temples are built
not with blood-scribed bricks
and stones carved with hatred,
temples are built,
like poetry,
with imagination and faith
in the hearts of men.

After Gujarat,
poems will be written
to affirm the truth
that there is no Ayodhya
outside of the poet's
epic imagination.

Translation: The Poet

28

Country

1. Patriotism

Looking for a job
to feed his family
the slum kid
after being rebuffed
by many looked gates
enlisted in the army.

And in no time
was martyred
on the strange soil
of a cold Kargil
before he could face life.

2. Treason

Birds do not sing the national song.
Rivers do not flow
on the straight lines of maps.
For the farmer in the field
there is no holiday
on the Fifteenth of August.
The man fighting with life
forgets the tune of *Vande Mataram*.

Translation: The Poet

Short Stories and Novel (Excerpt)

1

Words

Right from our college days we knew that Bhavnath would one day become insane. Even in those days he was writing poems and fancied himself to be passionately in love. It is true that every student in college writes poems and believes himself to be in love, but Bhavnath was different; he was a serious type of person and was also very talkative at the same time. When friends left the tea shop bored with his talk, he would stay on to harangue the manager. He had no close friends, but he was friendly with most of us.

We never thought much of Bhavnath's poetry. He wrote strange poems and it was no surprise that these were not published anywhere. I remember the day when Bhavnath came to the tea shop all excited and showed us his first published poem. He pulled a chair and joined our table and recited the poem. The poem was but six lines long and was titled "Ascent-Descent."

Grass Banyan tree
Ant Elephant
Man God.
God Man
Elephant Ant
Banyan tree Grass.

This was all there was to the poem. Had the poem not been published in a reputed journal, we would have laughed off his literary effort as we did his philosophising. But he was now the only published poet of our college and we had to suffer his discourse. He told us of the efforts involved in writing even a short poem and how he had spent six long months writing the six line poem. He went on to explain to us how the ascent was not merely from grass to banyan tree, but was also from grass to ant and ant to man. He brought in Darwin's theory of natural selection and cited Eliot and Pound to tell us what good poetry was.

We could not laugh at him this time and I think some of us who had dreams of becoming famous poets were rather jealous of Bhavnath. As we were getting up, someone made the mistake of asking him why he wrote such a straight poem with simple words instead of making the poem obscure as modern poets did. Bhavnath seemed prepared for the question. From his bag—needless to say, he was the only poet in the college who dressed like one and carried a shoulder bag—he pulled out a thesaurus and showed us the entry under vermin. He told us why he rejected words like pismire and picked on ant, and gave us a short lecture on modern poetry.

After the publication of the poem, Bhavnath started behaving like a celebrity and grew a beard. Though no other poem of his got published, he had earned recognition in the college as a poet. He was now pulling out the dictionary from his bag at the slightest provocation and entered into long arguments about the meaning and use of words. He cited the Rigveda (through sacrifice the wise followed the trail of the Word and found that she had entered the hearts of the Rishis) and the Bible (the Word was God) alike to explain his devotion to words.

When we left college after the final examinations, addresses had been exchanged, but it did not take long to lose contact with each other. We all got into various professions and I was posted to another city. I came across Bhavnath's poems in magazines from time to time

and took it that he too must have taken a job somewhere and was writing poetry as a hobby. His poems were obscure for me and knowing him as I did, I never took his poems seriously.

Coming home during vacations, I sometimes came across old friends and got news of Bhavnath. He was working in a newspaper office and had earned some reputation as a poet. One day I rang up the newspaper office and asked for Bhavnath and he seemed very happy to hear from me. We decided to meet in the college canteen the same evening.

I reached there first and surveyed the canteen. The place must have been the same as before, but to me it now looked smaller, darker and dirtier. I was wondering if this was due to my living in a different world when Bhavnath arrived. He looked and behaved the same as before and as we ordered tea explained that he was delayed on account of a prolonged argument with his editor about a word. I braced myself for a lecture on the significance of words, but Bhavnath kept quiet, for he had apparently not got over the incident in his office. I looked at him a little closely now. He was the same old Bhavnath, looking a little bit like a poet and a little bit like a mad man. When I met my other friends, we would discuss our health, our families, children's schooling and the price of things, but Bhavnath was the only one I discovered with whom I could go back to my college days and chat about the old times.

The manager of the tea-shop, whom I recognised but who could not place me, came to Bhavnath and enquired after him. Bhavnath seemed to have been a fairly regular visitor to the canteen over the years and regretted that he could not come everyday. I asked Bhavnath about his work in the newspaper office and he pulled out a magnifying glass from his pocket and passed on to me a dictionary which he took out from his bag. The book was printed in very small type and I found it difficult to read it. Bhavnath held it against the magnifying glass and suddenly became engrossed in whatever he was looking at. It was only when I tapped him on the back that he

informed me that his job in the newspaper office was that of a proof reader.

From the tea shop we moved over to the college lawn where Bhavnath made himself comfortable sitting on the grass. I Joined him, though I was finding it difficult to adjust myself to the surroundings. He enquired after me and I told him of my service career, of my wife and children and then looked at him. He gave me a very short reply—he lived all by himself, worked in the newspaper and wrote poetry whenever he felt like it. He showed me a copy-book of his poems. He had come a long way since Ascent-Descent. Though I did not think much of him as a poet, I congratulated him for continuing to write poetry. "Do you find time to read?" he asked me "I glance through some poetry sometimes," I replied. He put the copy-book back in his bag and said, "What a pity!" I knew that I was in for a lecture and that is exactly what happened.

Bhavnath drew up his legs to be a little more comfortable and started talking. "Glancing through is no reading," Bhavnath said, "to understand poetry you must go into each and every word." To emphasise the point he took out the magnifying glass and shook it at me and repeated, "each and every word. Hamlet tells his mother, you are your husband's brother's wife. All very simple and ordinary words in themselves. But then in their peculiar juxtaposition the very same words became extraordinary and startling. These words tell his mother to look into her soul and make her realise her folly, her guilt and her heinous behaviour. To get at the meaning, one has to go even beyond the words."

Maybe this was true of Shakespeare, I reflected, but what is so great in the words of a poem like Ascent-Descent? Bhavnath had said, words are inflammatory and can set things ablaze. But I refused to believe that the words of his poems would become sparks to burn down the evils of society. When I got news that Bhavnath had gone to jail for his poetry, I knew that there had been some mix up somewhere. I learnt later that it was his very first poem, or rather half the poem,

which had been the cause of his imprisonment. I was away at that time and whatever little I could know of the incident was this: when Bhavnath had written Ascent-Descent twelve years earlier, he could not have known that in the distant future, the elephant will be the symbol of a candidate contesting elections and that his opponent would quote Ascent to hint at the absurdity of the candidate's ambitions. In the controversy following the quotation, Bhavnath was dragged into the fray and the candidate with the elephant symbol thought that it would be of help to him if the poet gave a statement in his favour. But Bhavnath sent back all the emissaries of the candidate and finally wrote a letter to him asking him not to bother him any more. To his misfortune, the elephant won the elections and in the name of security Bhavnath was sent to jail.

By the time I met him again, I had been transferred back to my home town and Bhavnath had been released from jail. His release had been possible only because the elephant lost his election case and was unseated. When the elephant's opponents rejoicing over their victory, wanted to use the other half of the poem, Bhavnath refused them too. He got back the job which he had lost when he had gone to jail. This had also made Bhavnath quite famous and the journals now were vying with each other to publish his poems.

When I rang him up, he asked me to meet him in the college canteen. I had by now gone a few rungs up in the social ladder and considered it *infra dig* to go there and so I invited him to my house. But Bhavnath suggested that I come to his house instead and I agreed. I parked my car on the curb of the main street and entered the narrow lane which was his address. I had to traverse quite a distance through labyrinthine alleys before I reached his house. He was waiting for me in his single room dwelling, which was littered with newspapers, magazines and books. He removed a stack of books from a corner of the bed to make place for me to sit down. I was curious to know about his jail term and when I asked him about it, he gave me the whole story without any bitterness or rancour. He even said that the time he

spent in the jail was a blessing in disguise for him for, there, he could reflect on his life, which he thought would now enable him to write better poetry.

He went to the stove to make tea for me and I noticed that he was leading a self-contained life. I also noticed that he had become a serious person and exuded an intellectual calm. He was no longer the youngman who was the butt of jokes in college. Looking at him I could not think of Ascent-Descent as a funny poem. This transformed personality had even pervaded his past and coloured it differently.

As the water boiled on the stove, I asked Bhavnath, "Do you seriously believe that words could bring in a revolution?" Bhavnath kept quiet for a while to pour the tea into glass tumblers and said, "What do you understand of revolutions, you vermins of the establishment?" He was trying to insult me by hinting at my government job. I threw down the book I was holding in my hand and got up. Bhavnath put down the glass, held my hand and made me sit near him. He laughed a hearty laugh and said, "See how a few disconnected words enraged you." Though it took a while for me to calm down, Bhavnath had successfully and succinctly brought home to me his message. When he started talking to me about the power of words. I forgot all that he had said a minute earlier and listened to him with a renewed respect.

Words are weapons, Bhavnath explained to me, and one who used them successfully wielded power. Remember what Humpty Dumpty said? When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more, nor less. But how many authors can make such a claim? You love a girl and write her dozens of love letters professing love. But then the girl refuses to believe you. What does it show? It merely shows that you have not used the words right.

I asked him about the girl he was supposed to be in love with in college. Bhavnath suddenly became serious and said, "I will tell you all about her, but some other day, It is good that you reminded me of her. These days I hardly think of her. She is in all the poems I write,

but she is not in my mind." As I left him that day, sullen and sad, I regretted having reminded him of her. I suspected that he would now forego his supper and spend a sleepless night thinking of his past.

I got a little more interested in him and bought a collection of his poems. When I met him in his house the next time, I asked him about the obscurity of his poems. "If you have a couple of hours," he said, "stay on and I will explain it all to you." I was going to sit down when he said, "No, we will go out today." He then locked the door and led me through dark labyrinthine lanes to a quiet place with a small pond and trees all around, Bhavnath switched on his flashlight to reveal a rusty bench on which we sat down. It became completely dark when he switched off the light. "Don't worry," he said, "the moon will come up in a little while."

Bhavnath became silent. It was a strange experience for me to leave behind the car, walk a mile and sit on the lonely embankment waiting for the moon to rise. I thought of Bhavnath's poetry and lines from his poems started nudging my mind. What had appeared to be a disjointed jumble of words now came back to me in a mosaic of profound meanings. I was now in a transcendental state where grass and tree, ant and elephant were all self-contained, complete and fulfilled.

It was Bhavnath who broke the spell of the silence. Instead of telling me about the meaning of his obscure poems, he told me about his love. "Do you remember the girl," Bhavnath asked me, " she was in the science class." I did not remember, but made a mental note of a face of the college days and juxtaposed that face with young Bhavnath's and listened to him. By this time the moon had come up and the water in the pond had started glistening in the moonlight.

"We exchanged innumerable letters during our college days," Bhavnath continued his story, "and sometimes we wrote three to four letters a day. When she would go home during the holidays and I could not hear from her for a day or two I would feel suffocated and feel I was going to be die. She left after the final exams and there was

no letter from her for several days. I was thinking of going to her place when suddenly her letter came informing me that her marriage had been arranged. It was a great shock to me and I took to my bed. Sometimes I felt like going there and stopping the wedding. But then I thought that she perhaps wanted it that way since she merely mentioned the marriage and said nothing else. I kept quiet and she got married."

Bhavnath got her letter six months later, She had written that she was not going to live any longer and that he should take her away. Bhavnath did not know what to do. He wrote a cautious note, lest it fall into someone's hands. He received a reply soon enough, and they resumed their correspondence. Everytime she would write to him asking him to come and take her away, he would advise her to have patience. But she repeated her request to take her away in every letter.

Finally Bhavnath decided to go to her and wrote to her accordingly. She wrote back that she was very disturbed for her husband was ailing and his condition was critical. Bhavnath hoped that the man would die and this would solve all problems. He wrote to her as much and a few days later got a reply informing him that the husband had died of an overdose of medicines. She also asked him to meet her urgently as she had many important things to tell him.

Bhavnath neither replied to the letter nor made any effort to meet her. On the other hand he kept waiting for another letter from her. When no letter came after waiting for days, Bhavnath started off, wondering what sort of meeting he was going to have with the girl. He went to the strange city and found out her house, and asked a boy standing outside the house to go in and call her. The boy came back to tell him that she would not be able to come. He thought the boy did not understand right and so called the girl by her name. The girl did come. He had expected to see her in a widow's attire, dressed in white. But the girl was bedecked with ornaments and had a red sari on. As Bhavnath was going to step inside, the girl looked hard at him, said no, and shut the door in his face.

Bhavnath fell silent. The moon had by now come up and the spot shimmered in the moon-light. The surroundings and Bhavnath's story had woven a magic atmosphere and I was immersed in the fairy tale, which to me had no relationship with Bhavnath or the girl from our college.

Bhavnath suddenly said, "You were asking me about the obscurity of poetry. Well, let's take the story I just narrated and take away all the characters." At any other time, Bhavnath's words would have seemed illogical. But I found it possible to separate Bhavnath, the girl and her husband from the story.

Bhavnath said, "Right, let's now remove all the dialogues and emotions." I closed my eyes and removed these. What remained now? Some sadness, some pain, some understanding?

Bhavnath got up and said, "Let us go now." When we got up to leave the tiny lonely island of moonlight, he said, "Do you now understand what is poetry? Poetry is what remained."

As I drove back I wondered if what Bhavnath had told me was true or it was a mere story to define poetry. I read Bhavnath's poems again that night and found a new meaning in them.

From then on, I would meet Bhavnath regularly so long as I was posted there. Bhavnath showed me all the new poems he wrote and I enjoyed reading them. Later, I got transferred, but we kept up our correspondence and Bhavnath continued to post me whatever poems he wrote. Once I did not hear from him for a long time and wrote him a letter worrying about his health, I received his reply after a few days together with his latest poem. It was a strange poem, in which the 'words' were a strange combination of alphabets, nice sounding but conveying no meaning. Bhavnath had written, "You will be happy to learn that I have fallen in love again. I read somewhere" he had written, "that when we communicate with each other, only seven per cent of it is done through words, thirty-eight per cent through the voice and the remaining fifty-five percent through facial expressions."

What sort of love was this, I wondered. Was it the same girl? Or was it another fairy tale? I did not hear from Bhavnath after this. He had also stopped publishing poems. Around this time someone informed me that Bhavnath had become insane.

But I knew that Bhavnath still lived in his old house, hale and hearty and sound of mind. I also knew that when I met him next, he would be happily seated in his untidy room, but this time the dictionaries would be stacked away in a corner and he would be busy in a serious conversation with his tape recorder.

Translation: The Author

2

The Appointed Place

Hariram looked around the room and finally selected a chair at the farthest corner and sat down. There were several others like him in the room waiting for the interview call. They all had anxiety writ large on their faces and were busy exchanging pleasantries to while away the time of waiting. They were all attired in their best dresses and manners and Hariram was finding himself out of place in this group.

Hariram knew that he could not be one of them inspite of his best efforts. He was dark and considered himself ugly. He was convinced that his dress and demeanour, his language and pronunciation all showed his lowly birth. He cringed further in his own lowliness, loathing his low caste, his indigent father, his illiterate wife and his jealous relatives.

Hariram need not have been so ashamed of himself, for what he had achieved in the circumstances was not insignificant. He was the best educated in his caste in the locality. He belonged to the chamar caste and his father earned his living making shoes. Hariram knew that whatever he had achieved had been by the sheer dint of his efforts and determination. But at this moment, he was being tormented by an overwhelming sense of utter dejection. He remembered the young man he had met sometime back who had converted all his handicaps into assets and wished he could be like him.

He could never forget this young man whom he had met while waiting to be called for another interview. The youth had entered the room with confident steps and had told the people gathered there, "You are unnecessarily wasting your time; the job is mine." "Are you the minister's candidate?" someone had wisecracked. He said, "No, but I have such qualifications that I don't need any recommendations." Someone else said, "Then you must be a scheduled caste candidate." This made Hariram feel a pain in his chest and his heart started beating faster. But the young man took a puff from his cigarette and coolly said, "That's right; but I have put down in my application that I must be considered on merit without any special consideration for my caste." He drew on his cigarette again and laughed. This time he looked at them all with amused contempt and said, "My father is a safaiwala. That is but a respectable term for a sweeper, and my mother too works as a sweepress. But all that is irrelevant."

Hariram knew that he could never be like this youth. There was no question of his feeling proud of his lowly birth and he always felt ashamed when mentioning his caste. He thought that his being born in a remote caste-ridden village had made him this way. He remembered his childhood. Though he was a good student, he had to sit away from the others in the classroom. During the recess he stayed away from the other children and after the school helped his father in his work. His teacher was satisfied with his studies, but was never happy about the fact that a harijan student was doing so well.

The richest person in that area was a mine-owner, who was known to everyone as Seth. No one knew anything about his caste, but he was taken as belonging to a higher caste. Hariram remembered the rainy day in his childhood when he was running home after school and Seth's son had fallen down as he jostled past. The teacher had given him a beating for this and when he mentioned this to his father, he had scolded him. His father had thereafter taken him to Seth's house and had given him a thrashing there. He had cried a lot and had

loathed his father. When he grew older, he knew better. He knew that his father had done this for his own good; had he not done this, he surely would have got a more merciless beating at the hands of Seth's servants.

Hariram passed the High School examination. He now knew something about the independence of the country and the abolition of untouchability, but he also knew that these had no meaning in his village. His father was still engaged in his caste profession of making shoes and there had been no improvement in their economic condition. They still lived on the outskirts of the village, away from the high caste people. The day his matriculation results came out, his father took him to Seth. Seth was sitting on his verandah, his fat body bare. Hariram's father prostrated himself on the ground before him in salutation, and Hariram also did so, forgetting his clean clothes. Seth expressed his happiness at the news of Hariram's passing the examination and while fanning himself said, "How the bloody times have changed! Our boys are dropping out of the school and chamar boys are clearing examinations." Hariram's father folded his hands and said, "Sir, kindly do something for the boy."

Seth looked at Hariram up and down and when his father nudged him, he too folded his hands. Seth was in a happy mood and asked Hariram, "Do you want to continue studies?" Hariram nodded assent. Seth called his manager and said, " The chamar boy will go to the mining school: give his father whatever money is required every month." Hariram's father again prostrated himself in front of Seth and that is how Hariram got to continue his studies.

Hariram was the only untouchable in the hostel and he now preferred to forget those days of indignity and suffering. He kept himself away from the other boys and concentrated on his studies. Though he was not a very good student, he managed to pass every year and finally completed his studies in the mining school. His father took him to Seth's house where they stood with folded hands again, Seth was not well, but he expressed his happiness on seeing Hariram.

His father told Seth, "Sir, it is due to your kindness that the boy could study. Please give him a job. Let him not get any pay, but let him learn his work."

Seth said, "You should now forget that I had paid for his studies. Let him take a job wherever he wants and with whoever pays him more. I won't mind. But if he has to work for me, I can only take him on daily wage like all my other workers. He gets paid only for the days he has work. It is for you to decide," Hariram looked at his father who said, "Sir, he will work for you." Seth smiled and said, "As you like: I will pay well, seven rupees a day," Hariram and his father again folded their hands and Seth called his manager and said, "Put a chair outside on the verandah for the chamar boy."

This was how his service life had started. Since he was an untouchable, he could not sit with the others and had been given a chair and table outside on the verandah. Though he was better paid than many others, he was looked down upon because of his caste, and this created problems in his work too. Hariram realised that inspite of his education and his job, he had not been able to rise above his low social status, and inspite of his mining degree and work, he was for all purposes still a shoemaker.

To get out of this situation, Hariram studied privately and obtained a diploma. In the meantime, he had been married to an illiterate girl of his caste and his children had been growing up in the same unhealthy atmosphere of poverty and meanness. He knew that he could escape only by taking a job elsewhere, and so started applying against various advertisements.

However, he soon found out that it was not easy to get another job. After attending many interviews he came to the sad conclusion that interviews were mere eye-wash and candidates were in reality chosen much before the interview, and comments were invariably made about the daily wage job of his, and he never got selected. After failure in the interview, he had to go back to Seth. Seth was a nice person and was satisfied with Hariram's work. Every time Hariram

went back, Seth laughed and said, "So you are back again!" and called the manager, who put his chair back on the verandah.

Many years had gone by in the process and Hariram had returned to his seat on the verandah after several interviews. He was older now and this was the last interview he was attending. He had prayed to all known and unknown Gods before leaving his house and had also taken his father's blessings. He knew that this interview was for him the last hope of entry into a better future.

When he had exhausted his patience waiting, he was called inside. He always had a problem opening the door, for he could never figure out whether the door would open inward or outward. However, he got inside and faced the board of five interviewers. The questions started as soon as he had settled down. After ascertaining his age, education, expertise and experience, they asked him the inevitable question—"Why have you not got a regular job and why are you still on daily wages?" He knew the question was coming but the answer was not so easy. He said, "I was born in a remote village in a very poor family...."

He looked at the gentleman who had asked the question. He was now busy writing something on a piece of paper. Two others were busy in a conversation and one of them was cleaning his pipe. The only member who was listening to him seemed to get impatient and said, "There is no need for such a long introduction; please explain briefly."

Hariram looked at the interviewer, but his bored face and fretful looks discouraged him. He shrank in his presence, and finally started saying, "Briefly speaking...." Then he stopped. How can so many things be put briefly: the century old exploitation, poverty and atrocities, Rig Veda, Brahma's feet, Manu, Brahmavaivarta Purana, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Untouchability Act, entry into temples, cobblers' street, eternal Hinduism, pollution, purification, Jagadguru Shankaracharya, Bhangi colony, bonded labour, Sadgati, conversions, reservations of seats, separate wells, unclean occupations, schedules, Belchi....? Hariram kept quiet and realized

that he had failed. His pre-determined future was certain and inevitable which he could now foresee, clear and distinct, sitting in the interview room.

The door opened outside and Hariram saw himself come out with sure steps. Then there was the walk to the bus stop, the bus ride to the station, the afternoon train, the long evening walk to his village and a quiet night spent in his house. Next morning, he was back in Seth's office. Seth had died long since and his son who was now in charge of the business, sported safari suits and sat in a well furnished office. When Hariram stood before him with folded hands, he laughed and said, "So you are back!" He then called the manager and said, "Give the chamar a chair on the verandah."

Translation: The Author

3

Renunciation

On the dusty uneven road, our car again got into a ditch and Derek bumped against me. He woke up and said "Oh, hell" and went back to sleep. We had started very early in the morning, but it was quite hot now and the drive on the bad patch of road was very slow. We were still to go a long distance to reach the ashram.

I was doing a research work on illustrated Bhagavata Purana manuscripts and Derek was the assistant keeper of the eastern manuscripts section of an American museum. We had got to know each other through correspondence and were now going in search of a rare manuscript. Some folios of the manuscript were in various museums of Europe and the US and the remaining eighty pages were in the collection of Swami Dharmanand's Ashram Museum. This was a valuable manuscript not only for research, but in terms of money too. In the antique shops, each folio of this manuscript was valued at nine hundred US dollars.

I first got to know of this manuscript from Derek's letter. I was in correspondence with various museums for my research work and Derek had informed me that they had only three folios of a manuscript, but the best part of the manuscript was in India itself. That was my introduction to Derek, who was keenly interested in Indian art, had studied Hindi and wrote research articles in

magazines. He visited India regularly to learn Indian languages and to work on Indian art.

I would not have known about the rare manuscript but for Derek's letter. Though the Ashram was only a hundred miles from our University, I had received no replies to my letters to the Swamiji. I had also been deferring my visit to the Ashram because there were no regular means of transport to the place. When Derek wrote to me that he was coming to India and would be visiting the Ashram, I decided to go there with him.

My first meeting with Derek was indeed interesting. When I reached the airport, the plane had landed and the passengers had come into the lounge. From his letters and his writings, I had a mental picture of Derek and walked over to the elderly and donnish looking gentleman in gold framed spectacles only to be told that he was not Derek. As I was looking round, it was Derek who came to me. The hippie looking bearded man who had been on his hands and knees searching for his camera cap was Derek. The first thing I noticed was that he was very young. He had a camera on one shoulder and a sling bag on the other and he told me that this was all the luggage he carried. We checked up about his return ticket and then I took him to the University guest house, where I had arranged for his stay.

In his personal life, Derek was as disorganised and clumsy as he was systematic and neat in his research work. His room was an example of how to fill up an entire room with the contents of a sling bag. Various attachments of the camera were lying about on the floor and his papers were kept all over the room. There was a rare miniature painting lying between his tooth brush and the shaving cream. There was a photograph of some sadhu fixed to the wall with cellophane tape and there were lighted agarbatties under it. He was to stay here for three days and had planned it all one year in advance. He was to work one day in the university museum, one day in the language laboratory and the last day was meant for a visit to the Swamiji. On the first day itself, he had become quite an attraction in the university,

because of his funny dress and he collected a crowd when he practised yoga on the guest house lawn early in the morning.

There was a lot to learn from Derek. He knew little about many commonplace things and had no interest in many matters like politics. He never bothered about newspapers and could not give even some basic information about American life and society. But when it came to Indian art and language he knew his subject. During discussions about art, he would become a different person. He listened carefully to everyone and whatever he himself said was in well chosen words. In spite of his funny dress, his bohemian looks and his youth, he would in those few minutes look like a learned professor. I, and my friends in the university, did have a lot to learn from Derek so far as devotion to work was concerned.

Derek had many other good qualities. He was a vegetarian and ate very little. He could go to sleep anywhere and preferred the bare floor. One night when it was very hot, he slept on the lawn itself. On his second evening in the guest house, a friend of ours who had just returned from a visiting professorship in the USA had called us for dinner and the hostess had a real problem giving Derek a vegetarian meal. Derek simply did not seem to fit into the gathering and I had to bring Indian art into our discussions to make him feel at ease. He was quite excited so long as art was being discussed, but fell silent when the discussions moved to another subject. After the party, I went to the guest house to see him off.

On entering his room, Derek lighted the incense sticks and suddenly said, "I have decided to renounce everything and take sanyas." When he said that, I was sitting near his table and looking at his passport which was lying open. In the photograph in the passport, he did not have a beard and he was properly dressed in coat and tie. I could not connect the photograph with Derek now, as I heard him mention renunciation. I looked at Derek who was now sitting crosslegged with his eyes closed under the picture of the sadhu and wondered if this was his way of reaching sanyas. I wanted to talk to

him, but he seemed to be lost in meditation and I left him sitting there.

I, too, was thinking of renouncing the world at that time. When one does not have the burden of responsibilities and has free time on his hands, one thinks of a lot of strange things. Many philosophical questions bother the mind and the very existence seems meaningless. At such moments, I often thought of giving up my research work and renouncing the world. But such ideas were rather vague in my mind and I never gave them serious thought. Now, after hearing of Derek's decision, I also thought of sanyas, a state of renunciation in which there are no desires no attachments no aversions no loathings no sorrow no excitement no regrets and no memories.

Next morning, we hired a car and started off for the ashram. But for a small town half-way, there were no habitations along the road to the Swamiji's ashram and the road was bad and bumpy. It is while driving on this road that Derek told me about the Swamiji. He considered Swamiji to be a true saint and wanted to be initiated into sanyas by him. Swamiji had given him a mantra for meditation, and sitting in the car Derek from time to time closed his eyes to recite the mantra, and went off to sleep in between.

When the car gave a jolt this time, Derek woke up with a start and sat up. The June sun was very hot even at nine in the morning and the road was lonely and the countryside bleak. Derek showed me a truck driving ahead. It was loaded with blocks of ice and a young boy was playing with small chunks of ice which he broke out of the blocks. When the ice melted in his hands, he would take another piece and play with it. He was lost in his own play, as if everything else in the world was irrelevant and meaningless. "I wish I could be like this boy," Derek said, "playing with bits of ice and forgetting the whole world!"

The road now became more dusty and with great difficulty we overtook the truck with its load of ice and the earnest boy. It was after four long hours of dust and deserted road and Derek's swearing that

the car took a right turn to show a sign board with an arrow mark which said:

Swami Dharmanandji Maharaj
Gurukul Ashram –Kanyashram

A short while later we could see the ashram through the clump of trees, and reached its gate. The man waiting for us took us inside. The ashram buildings sprawled over a large area and there was a high wall surrounding the premises. We were taken through various buildings and corridors to the Swamiji's presence and Derek prostrated himself before him. Swamiji asked us to sit down and offered us the customary glass of water. He then showed us his book 'Sacred Symbols in Indian Art' and Derek immersed himself in the book. I was getting impatient about the Purana manuscript and sensing it, Swamiji opened the box near him and handed me the stack of painted sheets.

My joy knew no bounds when I looked at the folios, for they were essential to my work. Swamiji called an assistant and asked him to take me to another room where I could have a quiet look at the manuscript. As I followed him to the next room, I looked at the man. He was a muscular man, clean shaven and sharp featured and seeing him I suddenly thought of Hanuman, the monkey god. As I went through the folios, Hanuman sat near me and volunteered to explain the text and the illustrations.

I was surprised at the erudition of Hanuman, for he seemed to know a great deal about Indian art and literature. Inspite of my years of research on the subject, I considered myself a novice before him and I closed my notebook to listen to him. Suddenly Swamiji called him and Hanuman went out. I went through the folios and took some photographs and when I came out, I found Swamiji and Derek standing outside.

I looked around the ashram buildings. Where we were was the kanyashram, the school for girls. The boy's school was separated from this portion by a high boundary wall. All the students and teachers of

the girls' school, children included, were dressed in white saris and blue blouses. Except the Swamiji, Hanuman and two acolytes, no other man was allowed on this side. Swamiji had an ochre loincloth on him, but Hanuman and the two acolytes wore white pajamas and vests. There were beautiful flower gardens inside the ashram and many fruit-bearing trees, and deer and peacocks moved about adding colour to this idyllic set-up.

Swamiji invited us to see his art collection and Hanuman brought the keys and opened the door of the museum. The museum was another surprise for me, for it housed many rare pieces of art and one would never have imagined such a rich collection in this remote place. Hanuman showed us round and I noted that he knew each and every piece in the museum. He took us round the library which had many rare books and I was indignant that no one was making any use of the museum or library. Or rather, it was only Hanuman who seemed to make use of the collection, for I was now convinced that Hanuman had read each and every book in the library and was familiar with each piece of art. When he was showing us round, he was a personification of modesty, though what he said was profound and learned. He seemed to shrink before the Swamiji and behaved like a humble servant of his.

We were now called to lunch and it was Hanuman who brought in our plates. The ashram functioned according to real or imagined Indian traditions and there was no salt in the food. I had difficulty eating the saltless diet but took it that this training will help me in attaining sanyas. I however found that Derek finished his food with relish. After the meal, Swamiji took Derek into his room and closed the door from inside. They were perhaps going to discuss the details of Derek's initiation into a life of renunciation, I thought. I looked for Hanuman, but he was also not to be seen. The best I could do was to take a walk in the orchard and try to photograph the peacocks.

I ran after a peacock to photograph it, but it kept eluding me and refused to be caught in my lens. Finally I gave up the chase and

decided to sit down and look at the peacock, which was now at a safe distance from me and had started dancing with its feathers fanned out. The weather was pleasant now and I looked up at the sky to find clouds floating about. The clouds, the green trees and the suggestion of rain had created a relaxed atmosphere and I do not know when I dozed off sitting under the tree. I also had a fascinating dream during my short nap. I saw the girls of the ashram transformed into peacocks and running about the garden in their white and blue uniforms. I also saw Derek in a clown's robe hopping after them, camera in hand and Hanuman roaring with laughter as he sat on the topmost branch of the tree.

I snapped out of my dream to find a young girl sitting near me and got into conversation with her. The kanyashram had strange rules; girls once admitted were not allowed to go out of the school till they finished their studies. Girls would therefore stay in the school for ten to twelve years at a stretch and it was only once in a while that a member of their family would come and meet them. Most of the girls were from very poor families and had come from long distances, and once admitted in the school were virtually cut off from their families. The girls were not allowed to go outside the ashram boundaries and the Swamiji was very strict about this discipline.

The girl looked to me both happy and sad at the same time and I could not decide whether to sympathise with her or feel happy. Finally I sent her to call Hanuman and it is only then that I knew that he was known as Brahmachari here. When Brahmachari came to me, I got to know more about the ashram from him.

Swami Dharmanand was born into a rich family and had left home at the age of sixteen. After the death of his parents he had inherited the property and had started the ashram, and in course of time had enlarged its activities through donations. He had profound knowledge of ancient Indian religion and culture and had edited several old scriptures. He wanted to train boys and girls in the ancient Indian traditions and had set up the ashram schools. He had strict

rules of discipline for the students and enforced them ruthlessly. He personally supervised the working of the school and the hostels and himself never went out. The boys' and girls' schools, though side by side, had nothing to do with each other and the schools were separated by a high wall with spikes.

There had been only one instance of deviant behaviour among students in the long history of the ashram. Inspite of all precautions, a boy and girl had fallen in love, Since the gate of the girls' school remained locked at night, it was the girl who had to scale the boundary wall to come to the boys' section, from where they ran away. The police had brought them back after two days and they had been subjected to severe chastisement. At the end of it all a general assembly had been called where the girl was to admit her misconduct and beg for forgiveness. The girl had broken down by then and everyone expected her to do as she was told. But before the assembly the girl affirmed in no uncertain words that whatever she had done was right and proper. Swamiji face turned red and he started trembling in anger as he heaped curses on the girl. But the boy and the girl again ran away after two days, this time in broad daylight through the main gate. After they left there was a mock funeral of the two by burning their effigies, and the ashram regulations were made stricter.

Brahmachari narrated the entire episode to me without any excitement as if he himself had no personal views on the behaviour of the boy and the girl or the wrath of the Swamiji. He himself had been a student of the ashram. He was the youngest of three brothers in a poor family. He was very good in Sanskrit and so his brothers had sent him to Swami Dharmanand. He had completed his studies here and had thereafter been engaged to look after the library. Swamiji wanted his library to be the biggest in the state and bought many books. It was Brahmachari who made full use of the library and wrote many research articles. I had a feeling that the book on sacred symbols was Brahmachari's work though it bore Swamiji's name as author, When I asked Brahmachari, he merely said, the name does not matter: what is

important is the contents of the book. He also added that the Swamiji was like his father.

His mention of a father-son relationship solved many of my doubts. Brahmachari did a lot of odd jobs for the ashram, but unlike others, he took no remuneration. He had no contact with his own family and the ashram was his whole world and living in the ashram he was free from all worries.

From the garden, we went back to Swamiji. Derek and he were standing outside, waiting for me to join them for going round the school. We had hardly gone a few steps when the dust storm started. The sky became gray and dust filled the air. The landscape, with its trees and flowers and peacocks, seemed to lose all colour and turn drab and dreary like a bad black and white photograph. I thought Swamiji would go back to his room, but he led us to the classrooms of the girl's school, though the wind and dust.

It soon started raining and the dust storm subsided. The sky was overcast with dark clouds and lightening sparked. As we went round the classes, there was a gong. It was time for prayers and the girls came out to the courtyard to line up for the common prayer. The prayer had just begun when the rains became torrential and the thunder and the downpour drowned the voices. The rain water now formed rivulets in the courtyard and rain lashed the buildings. We sat on the verandah and looking at the hazy drenched figures of the girls and listening to the muted prayer song, I had the feeling of a surreal happening .

We came back to Swamiji's room when the prayers ended. We had finished our work and wanted to get back soon since Derek had to catch the flight the next morning. As soon as the rain subsided a little, we took leave of Swamiji. He sent Brahmachari with us as he had in any case to come to our town to get a cement permit for extension of the ashram buildings. Swamiji was always concerned about the expansion of the ashram activities and was busy collecting donations to add new wings. Swamiji had asked Brahmachari to get back with the permit in a day or two, for work had been held up on account of cement.

The road had become very bad after the rains and our car drove at a snail's pace. Derek did not seem to be happy even after his long conversation with Swamiji. He was quiet and thoughtful. Suddenly he asked Brahmachari, "Have you been able to attain sanyas?" Brahmachari laughed and said, "Don't you see my white dress? I am yet to renounce everything and earn my right to the ochre dress. And I do not think I will ever get them; I have so many failings." When I asked him, he told me how he could not stick to all the disciplines required of a sanyasin. Like having his head clean shaven, Swamiji shaved his head everyday, but Brahmachari could never keep to the daily routine. He even bought a pair of hawai chappals the previous summer after going bare feet for twenty-five years. While Swamiji was bare feet and bare body, Brahmachari had a shirt on for he was going to the city. Derek, who was particular about his vegetarianism, asked Brahmachari about his food habits. While in the ashram, Brahmachari took the ashram food, but when travelling, he could not get salt free food, he took whatever he got to eat and what is more, relished it. Once he even took potatoes out of the fish curry in a friend's house, because there was nothing else. Swamiji was very strict in these matters. No wonder he was a true sanyasin, and Brahmachari was far from it.

Brahmachari again regretted that he would never be able to attain sanyas, but said that he was quite happy and content serving Swamiji. Derek closed his eyes and became thoughtful again. He was either thinking of newer ways of achieving sanyas or else was worried about the flight next morning. I started wondering if it would be worth giving up salt in one's effort to attain sanyas.

It was still raining heavily and had become dark too and the driver said that he had to stop. We coaxed him to drive on at least upto the town which came midway, so that we could spend the night there. The twenty minute drive to the place took a full hour and a half and by the time we reached there, all shops had closed, Brahmachari directed the driver to a street where we stopped the car and Brahmachari got down

and went in search of his friend who lived there. Finally we all got into his friend's small two room house to wait out the night. His friend was suffering from fever and while Brahmachari looked after him, we tried to sleep in the outer room.

In a short while Brahmachari joined us and went off to sleep right away on the bare floor. Derek and I could not sleep in the strange place and lying down waited for the rain to cease. The rain did cease after a couple of hours and when we came out there was even a moon in the sky. The driver was already awake and was sitting inside the car smoking a cigarette. We decided to start immediately so that Derek could catch his morning flight. We went in to wake Brahmachari up, but he was already awake. He said he would stay back to look after his friend. Derek reminded him of the cement permit, but Brahmachari told him that for him his friend was more important. When we got into the car taking leave of Brahmachari, I said to Derek, "Brahmachari will never reach sanyas."

The story should have ended with our leaving the strange sleepy city at a mysterious moonlit hour, but fate had it otherwise. The journey had a more dramatic ending. Just as we were entering our city, the driver dozed off and the car hit the traffic island. I woke up with a start and felt myself all over to confirm that I had not broken any limbs. I got down from the car and found Derek getting down on the other side. The driver was screaming, but he too had got down and I could see that he was unhurt. His scream was only to get our sympathy. We rebuked him even then and he tried to start the car, but the engine had conked. We paid his dues and he argued a little and as we reasoned with him, he remembered his imaginary injuries and started screaming again.

It was dawn now and there was no hope of getting any other conveyance at that time. We figured that we could walk back, Derek to the airport and I to the university. Our roads parted there itself and Derek asked me not to come with him and picked up his bag. I was very tired, but the university was not far. I shook hands with Derek

and before going on watched him take the road to the airport. He was walking briskly ahead. But the person I was seeing now was not the bearded Derek of bizarre dress and bohemian manners; I was seeing the Derek of the passport picture, clean shaven and neatly dressed, walking, brief case in hand, between high rise buildings of a crowded American city.

Translation: The Author

4

Folk Culture

I was going to our village after a lapse of several years. I had lost touch with the village for quite some time and must have visited the place only once or twice after my school days. After I joined college and later took a job after my graduation, I had really nothing to do with the village. As a matter of fact, we had severed our connection with the village for years now. We had sold off our land there and I was going to the village, taking four days' leave from my job, to sell off a house we had there.

Come to think of it, it was also not our ancestral village. When my father was the post-master in that area, he had bought some cultivatable land at a cheap price and had later built a house in the village. I was born in that house. When father got transferred from that place, we stayed back and I studied in the village school. When I entered college, we left the village and moved to the city. We rented a house there and virtually lost touch with our village. Only father visited the village now and then to look after the land and sometimes a tenant from the village would come with rice from the fields. When tenancy laws were introduced, father sold the paddy lands. He, however, kept the house in the fond hope that one of us would some day go back to settle down there.

After father died, I was the only member of the family who kept contact with the village. I had many pleasant memories of the place for I had spent my entire childhood and school days there. Our house in the village was not really a part of the main village. The villagers were all untouchables and during those days there was no question of living together with them. If he had not got the land cheaply, father would perhaps have built the house elsewhere. Our house was located on the outskirts of the village, on the banks of a pond and we had the advantage of both being in the village and away from it.

Living with the untouchables would normally have created a problem; but father having a transferable job, our family had very little contact with our relatives. What we did in this place was beyond the probing eyes of our kin and so we were happy living with the villagers. The villagers were mostly landless labourers and earned their livelihood working in the fields of rich land owners. There was a primary school in the village, where the children studied for a couple of years, before they were old enough to go and work in the fields.

As a child, I had many friends in the primary school. When I went to study in the high school in the neighbouring village, some boys from our village had joined me there, but they soon dropped out. I had spent my younger days in great happiness in our village. Even now as I thought of the open fields, the mango groves, the river and the hills, my heart filled with memories of happy and idyllic times. Sitting in my small room in the city I often remembered my village and my childhood.

There were many festivities in the village. Though there was no big temple, there were many small structures housing idols, and the banyan tree at one end of the village was also the abode of many deities. On auspicious days, the place turned into a whirl of colourful clothes, buntings, flowers, vermilion and incense and singing and chanting and sacrifice of cocks. These used to be days of great fun for the village children.

The festival for which our village was best known was the tiger dance. The three day festival was held during the month of Phalguna, when there was little work in the fields. Preparations for the festival started several weeks earlier and during the festival, the dance itself became the major event, attracting spectators from the neighbourhood. After the festival, our dancers went to other villages to perform and earned some money too. Raghu Chowkidar was the leader of the dance group and trained the young men before the festival. Raghu looked after our land and his son Gopal was my classmate. They were thus close to our family and I got a chance to see the preparations for the tiger dance from close quarters.

The dance really was something special. When fifteen to twenty strapping young men with yellow and black stripes on their bare body danced to the vigorous music of drum and clarinet, shivers would run up the spines of spectators. Year after year, Raghu and his enthusiastic band of dancers practiced hard to make the dance a success. For about three weeks before the festival, Raghu would forget about his meals and sit under the tree with his drum. If any of the dancers made a mistake during practice, he would shout at him. If my father gave him some errand during this period, Raghu would say, "Let the festival be over first".

When Gopal joined the dance that year, many were surprised and jealous too. Gopal was flighty and not good at his studies. He also was the youngest of the dancers. But he worked hard at the dance and soon became one of the best. After he left school, he devoted more and more time to dance and on the days Raghu was unable to come for the practice, Gopal took over training the other dancers.

When we moved away from the village, father had entrusted Raghu with looking after our land and the house. Some years later, we got news of Raghu's death and naturally Gopal took over the responsibility of looking after our property in the village. Around that time, I remember having gone to our village once. Gopal had the keys for our house and during my stay in the village, it was Gopal who

looked after me. It was shortly before the festival and Gopal was then very busy in preparation for the dance. One evening I went to see the practice session with him and was very happy to note that the young men treated Gopal with respect and learnt their dance with enthusiasm. Gopal was now known as Gopal Chowkidar and everyone called him this. I do not know if any of Raghu's forefathers had in fact been a chowkidar in the village, but somehow the title had stuck.

This time, I was going to the village after about fifteen years of my last visit. My only link with the village now was Gopal. I used to write to him once in a while and sent him money for repair of the house. I was looking forward to my stay in the village and meeting Gopal. I got off the train and started looking for Gopal in the station. I did not find him, but a fashionable young man met me and said that he had been sent by Guru Gopal to take me to the village. When I asked him about the bus, he said that he had a taxi for me. I was very happy about the progress our village had made, for a taxi was unknown in that area in my time. Even buses operated very infrequently then and we had to get down from the bus and walk through muddy tracks and ridges of paddy fields to reach our village.

I was even more surprised to find a nice metalled road to our village, which the taxi took. When I asked the young man if the road was part of the community development work in the village, he told me that the road had been done by some cultural organisation. I was about to ask him more about it when our taxi stopped. Like the road, I also found it difficult to recognise our village. The village appeared to have changed completely and everything had a new and prosperous look. The taxi stopped in front of our house and the house too was unrecognisable. It had been freshly white-washed, there were rooms added to it and there was electric light. There was a signboard in front of the house proclaiming it to be the Institute of Tiger Dance.

My surprise knew no bounds when I discovered some foreigners in the verandah. Gopal came out of the house much to my relief, but it

did take me a few seconds to recognise him, for he was attired like a classical musician in tight trousers and a long coat. I called out his name and went forward to embrace him, but he extended his hand and said "good morning" and shook my hand with great aplomb. He introduced me to the foreigners and showed me to my room. I was both surprised and delighted to find that Gopal Chowkidar was now able to talk in completely ungrammatical but fluent English and that the foreigners were treating him with respect.

When I was alone with him in the room, Gopal Chowkidar updated me about happenings here. Tiger dance had become world famous in the meantime and he was getting invitations from foreign countries to go and perform there. He was staying abroad half the year giving programmes and teaching foreign students. Many foreigners were coming to our village to learn dancing and also to do research. Gopal had put our house to good use and it was he who wanted to buy it. He asked me to come and see the rehearsals that evening. I expressed surprise since the festival was several months away. Gopal explained that there were dance classes round the year and, as a matter of fact, the festival had been shifted to winter since it was easier for foreigners to stay here during those cooler months. He gave me a small booklet on their activities and took leave.

Going through the booklet, I learned many things about which I was not aware. Tiger dance had now been found to be a classical dance form which followed the system laid down in Vyaghra-shastra, a newly discovered ancient treatise written on palm-leaves. This classical form had been confined to a small region, our village to be precise, and had been perverted and vulgarised by local influence. The dance would have been lost to posterity had an American anthropologist not spent a night in our village a few years back on account of his car breaking down and seen the preparations for the festival. That is when the revival and purification of the dance began and it became world famous in course of time with the efforts of Guru Gopal and the support of western scholars and musicologists and institutions.

The booklet made me both happy and sad. I was happy because something from my village had now become world famous and my childhood friend was the centre of it all. My sadness was because the village of my childhood did not exist any longer and our very own tiger dance had been made public property. I consoled myself, however, with the thought that the old must give place to the new and that progress should be welcomed.

As I came out of the room engrossed in these thoughts, a foreigner accosted me. From the camera and tape-recorder hanging from his shoulder and the note-book in his hand, I guessed that he was a research scholar. Without so much as a hello he held the microphone in front of me and asked, "Are your Guru Gopal's landlord?" I could not give him a straight answer since Gopal's having the keys of our house did not exactly make him my tenant. When I kept quiet, he reframed his question and said, "This is your house, isn't it?" As soon as I said yes, he shot the next question at me. "Are you a Brahmin or a Shudra?" Before I could answer him, he added, "What is your Gotra?" He then led me back to my room, made me sit down, and connected the tape recorder to the electric outlet in the wall. He sat down comfortably and started cross-examining me. Though it was irritating, I went through the question session as politely as I could, hoping that it was all for Gopal's good.

Fortunately someone came to my rescue and called me to come and see the rehearsal. There was a big new hall at one end of the village in which they were having the rehearsals. It was brightly lit and Gopal was sitting on a dais with Guru-like seriousness on his face. Sitting amidst the foreigners, I looked around. A foreigner at one corner was adjusting his camera on a tripod. A European girl, tape recorder in hand, was sitting at Gopal's feet and was looking at his face with a dazed expression. The dancers were sitting in three rows dressed in velvet with a tiger skin pattern and they had masks on their faces. Eight musicians with different instruments were sitting on Gopal's left, behind microphones, awaiting the Guru's instructions.

When we were all seated, Gopal closed his eyes and chanted some invocation. He touched the ground and then his forehead. The dancers thereafter touched his feet one by one and the girl sitting at his feet joined them too. Then the music started, the dancers stepped forward, and there was a good hour's vigorous dancing. The dance, however, did not touch me as the dance of old did: as a matter of fact this dance had little in common with the dance I had witnessed in my childhood. When the dancers took off their masks after the dance, I also noticed that there were three foreigners among them and one of them was a girl.

As soon as the dance was over, the research scholar cornered me to resume his inquisition. I dodged him with great difficulty, only to get entrapped by another foreigner. Fortunately, this man was polite and courteous and instead of asking me questions, supplied me with lots of information. He was in fact the person responsible for the revival of the dance and but for him, the dance would have fallen into oblivion He told me how Indian folk culture was deteriorating day by day in the absence of patronage and protection and what steps were necessary to preserve it in a pure and pristine form. Cheap elements were getting into folk culture, thereby making it a travesty of culture. For instance, tiger dance had been divested of its original mask and dress over the years and fortunately these were reintroduced. I felt relieved and grateful that tiger dance had been saved from the hands of the uncultured villagers thanks to the efforts of the foreigners and in its pure and pristine form, it was now getting encomiums in foreign lands. I wondered what Raghu Chowkidar would have thought about it all if he had been alive.

But then, I thought to myself, it was no longer Raghu Chowkidar's village: it was an international centre of dance. The people of our village had nothing to do with the dance: the dance was now a form to be enjoyed by learned people in foreign countries and to be the subject of research by musicologists and anthropologists. The dancers in masks and velvet dresses were no longer my brethren; they were cultural ambassadors of our country.

With these thoughts in mind, I went over to Gopal. The girl with the tape recorder was still shadowing him. Gopal had a mask in his hand and was explaining why the eyes were painted red. According to Bharat's Natyashastra, he was saying, red symbolised fury. The girl's face brightened and she asked Gopal to stop a while as she made notes in her note book. I was told that the girl had engaged herself in the task of writing a biography of Guru Gopal. When she learnt that I was a childhood friend of Gopal, she made me promise a full day's interview with her.

Going back to our house from the place of rehearsal we skirted the village, which was now quiet and asleep. As I walked the short distance, the moonlight through the trees, the winter fog, the screeching of the crickets, the smell of the earth and the flight of bats all reminded me of my childhood. But the magic was suddenly cut short when we turned round the grove to come face to face with our house with its electric lights and the signboard standing like a guard in front of the house.

We were having dinner when Gopal asked me how long I planned to stay. I looked around and a strange depression enveloped me as I found myself surrounded by anthropologist, musicologist and biographer with their camera, tape recorder, note book and flash light. I felt uncomfortable and out of place. I said to Gopal, "I have some urgent work: I must leave early tomorrow morning."

Translation: The Author

5

Island

When the minister's car left the highway and took the cart-track, Simachal noticed that much had changed during those seven days. Everything was under water a week back; there was no road, no foot-path, nothing. They had taken four hours to reach the village by boat. Rains had not subsided and the heavy clouds had made it dark and dusky. It drizzled a bit when they were on the boat, but by the time they reached the village, the sky had cleared and it was sunny. It was, however, no village they saw there. It was only a flat patch of high land with a big tree in the middle, which floated amidst the expanse of water. About a hundred and fifty people, including young and old, sat huddled around the tree. The village had been washed away two days earlier and the villagers had taken shelter on this high ground.

Simachal had gone there earlier with a relief party. He knew the village, for he was doing a study on life below the poverty line and had chosen the village a year earlier to do his study. He was born and brought up in a middle class family in the city and knew nothing about rural life. When he had gone to this village, he was not only seeing a rural area for the first time, it was also his first acquaintance with poverty. That poverty and deprivation could be so severe and inhuman, he realised seeing the village. The villagers were not only below the poverty line, they were below the line of human existence

itself, for in that sort of existence, it was not possible to live with any human dignity. The houses were all mud huts and possessions meant a few earthen pots. The villagers had no land of their own and lived on wage earning which was very irregular. There was no work most of the time and they had to look for wild roots in the forest for their very subsistence.

Simachal had written a hard-hitting story in his paper about the pitiful conditions in the village. When floods came and he knew that this was one of the affected villages, Simachal had joined a government relief party to go there. Their boat carrying food packets and medicines was warmly greeted by the villagers, who fell eagerly on the relief supplies. But Simachal noticed one peculiar thing. The villagers did not seem the helpless pitiable lot that he had found them to be when he had been to the village earlier. As if the disaster had given them a strange courage and determination to fight the odds.

After they had something to eat, the villagers told them about the night of the floods. They had all left their huts in time to come to the high land. The huts had been washed away, but they were all safe. Except that an old man was suffering from high fever and was now breathing his last. Simachal went to the old man, who was lying on the ground, his breath feeble and irregular. It was a question of a few hours or may be minutes. His kith and kin were sitting near the old man and there was nothing that could be done.

There was a loud yell from the branches of the tree and Simachal looked up to see the children at play. Dirty little naked children were at their games unmindful of the tragedy. They were yelling at the boy who was on one of the top branches of the tree trying to catch the cat which had gone up. The cat climbed higher still as the boy approached it, but the boy did not give up. Now all the villagers came to watch the fun. Even the relatives of the old man left him and joined them. The boy finally managed to catch the cat and said, "I am going to throw it down." Simachal said, "you will kill it." Someone standing near Simachal laughed and said, "Cats don't die that easy. Whichever way you throw it, it will land on its feet."

The boy threw the cat down and truly enough the cat stood up and started licking its tail. They gave the cat something to eat and then they forgot the cat and gave their attention to Simachal. They requested Simachal to bring the minister to their village. They do not come during the normal times, they said, let them at least come and see us when we are in distress.

From there the boat took them to other villages for distributing relief material. When they returned back, it was night, and Simachal went straight to the newspaper office to file his report. He mentioned the death of an old man in the village.

Simachal then tried to find the minister, for he had a promise to keep. This was difficult job. When he finally tracked the minister through conference rooms, public meetings, party office and so on, he found him resting after a long tour and discussing about relief work in his constituency. Simachal told him about the village and gave him a pathetic picture of the people. The village was not in the minister's constituency and the minister had, in the meantime, visited many affected villages. He, therefore, did not evince much interest in visiting the god-forsaken place. Simachal now used the ultimate weapon of his profession and said, "you were telling me the other day about...."

The minister remembered the many deals with the newspaper and said, "I have seen so many villages by now. What else is there to see?" Simachal told him, "You will see the poorest village, where the people are still starving. You are giving statements that there have been no casualties; but here is a village where there has been at least one death." The minister now agreed and asked his people to draw up a tour programme which should include this village too.

They could make the trip only after another seven days. By that time, rains had completely stopped, and people were apprehending a drought. The roads were all right again and there was no problem going by jeep. When one looked at both sides of the road, it was difficult to believe that a few days earlier, everything was submerged.

Only the broken bridges and washed away patches on the road hinted at the disaster that had been.

The other reminder of the floods was the crowd of people which thronged the relief centres to collect free rice. These people waited for days for the rice to come. Whichever village the minister visited, there was complaint about inadequate relief. Though at many places government had taken up road works to provide employment, able-bodied youngmen lined up to collect free rice rather than go and work there. It was quite a shameful sight.

Their jeep passed through many villages and all the relief material they carried with them was soon distributed. The Minister asked Simachal, "should we still go to your village? We have no material left." Simachal said, "I have made a promise to these people. We must go even if for a short while." When the jeep took the road for the village, Simachal wondered why he was taking the minister to the village. Was it only to fulfil a promise he had made to the villagers or would it really benefit them in any manner? He felt a little guilty now, as he had felt when he had first visited the village. As if he was in some way responsible for the misery of the poor villagers.

When the jeep stopped at the outskirts of the village, Simachal could not believe his eyes. The village was the same as he had seen it a year before. Two rows of huts with naked children and stray dogs playing in the street. There was no sign of a severe flood having played havoc. The Minister said, "This place seems all right. It was rather the other villages which looked worse affected." He was right and Simachal kept quiet.

The villagers came out and stood surrounding the jeep. They had no grievances to make to the minister. It was as if the minister and his jeep were mere objects for their entertainment. The minister promised to send them more relief materials soon. There was no other demand. Simachal suggested that the minister should give some money to the family of the old man who had died. When the minister promptly announced a grant, the villagers laughed. The old man had

not died. He had not been able to walk up to the jeep, but was lying outside his hut and was enjoying the goings on.

They got into the jeep to leave. To Simachal, the whole trip now seemed completely meaningless. What did the villages get out of their visit? May be, he will make out a story for his paper. But even that would not make a great story, for the village did not offer the picture of distress the readers wanted. Even the old man, whose death might have evoked some sentimental response, had not obliged them.

When the jeep moved, Simachal looked back. In the pale light of the evening, the village looked like a dead island. It was the same as he had seen it a year earlier. There had been no change. In this age-old village, the houses were ramshackle and tumble down as before. The people were as poor, as hungry and as bereft of hope. The old man was alive yet, and the naked children were at their games and the cat was not dead. The village had survived the floods. As it had survived the five year plans. There was nothing that could be damaged in the village. Simachal gave the village a last look as the jeep turned corner. Everything was the same as before. Nothing had changed in this time-worn village and in the life of its people.

Translation: The Author

6

Community

People living in the outskirts of the small town, where the man moved about, knew little about him. They did not know which religion or caste he belonged to. As a matter of fact, no one knew what his real name was. He was a madman and everyone called him Pagal, a lunatic. His not having a name or caste or religion posed no problem since he kept to himself and had very little contact with others. He never spoke, so it was not known where he was from or what his language was: people had given up bothering about it long since. There was even a doubt if he was really dumb or had simply decided not to talk. Be that as it may, Pagal was now a well known mobile institution of this suburb.

Pagal had no fixed place of residence nor any regular arrangement for his meals. He ate whatever was available and slept wherever he found a place. He never begged nor did he refuse anything given to him. All day long, and sometimes through the nights, he kept on pacing the street and people were familiar with the special sound of his tread in a pair of heavy boots. They thought of him when he was not to be seen in the street for a day or two and it was always reassuring to listen to his footfall in the quiet streets of winter nights.

There was, however, a problem concerning Pagal whenever there was a communal riot. Every couple of years, political parties would

decide on a riot for various reasons. Though the riots were grim and bloody affairs in the city, resulting in murder and plunder and rape and refugee camps, they took a different form in the suburb. Communal disharmony here never went beyond mutual abuse, fisticuffs and breaking of furniture in the shops.

Pagal posed a problem on such occasions because of his unkempt beard. At a casual glance he looked like a Muslim because of his beard. However, if one gave him a second, serious look, he also resembled a puritanic Hindu like the jagadguru. During Hindu-Muslim riots, Hindus found in Pagal an easy victim and belaboured him. For them, Pagal was then a fanatic Muslim. During the height of the riots, Muslims, because of their inferior numbers, kept quiet, but as soon as the situation normalised a bit, they came out to retaliate. They too got hold of Pagal, called him a Hindu fanatic and a Sadhu Maharaj and gave him a beating. Pagal thus got it from both sides, but even on the worst days of the riots, he never kept away from his patrolling of the streets.

The communal riots had their own unwritten rules and conventions. The people in this suburb knew exactly when trouble would start. Leaders from the town would descend on the suburb the previous night, conspire with their henchmen over cups of tea, and leave very early in the morning. The disturbance was then formally launched from the tea shops under the old banyan tree.

There were two tea shops next to each other. One was called the Hindu Tea-stall; the other shop was named after Gandhiji, but since it was owned by a Muslim, everyone called it the Muslim Tea-stall. The Muslim owner was an old man whom everybody called Mahatma. Though police and other government officials would be fully unaware about the plans for a communal disturbance and arrived at the trouble spots after everything was over, the news of an imminent trouble reached the people well in time. On the day of riot, old Mahatma quietly went to the shop before day-break and put away the cash box and fragile things in a safe place and locked the shop again.

The events which followed next had this standard scenario: Pagal finished his night patrol of the streets and sat down under the banyan tree at about nine in the morning. He knew that he would be asked over for tea from one of the tea-shops. He pretended unconcern and kept waiting, not knowing that it was riot day. No one offered him tea. A little later, groups of youngmen gathered under the tree. Soon they started shouting slogans about Mahatma Gandhi, Bharat Mata, Hindu Unity and so on. When the sun became a little hotter, the slogans changed to Down with Muslims, Blood for Blood, Traitors Quit and so on.

Pagal, looking unhappy without his morning cup of tea, also joined the crowd and behaved as if he too would shout slogans with them were he not dumb. The crowd now marched towards the Muslim shop. Mahatma, who knew all the youngmen and was familiar with the drill, took out the kettle from the stove and came outside. The boys now pulled out the signboard from the shop, threw it on the ground and two of them started jumping on it. They broke the glass panes and took out biscuits and cookies and distributed these among the crowd. The Hindu shopkeeper also considered it an occasion to distribute eats from his own shop. As a matter of fact, he locked his cashbook and came out to join the slogan shouting. The attendant of the Hindu shop used the stove of the Muslim to prepare cups of tea for the crowd. Soon it was noon and the shouting was feeble and weak and it was time to call it a day. However, someone reminded the others that they had not yet manhandled a Muslim, without which no communal disturbance would be complete. They all now looked at Pagal, and four of them rushed at him calling him a bloody Muslim. Someone pushed Pagal and he fell down. They kicked him around for a while and then dispersed shouting slogans about Mahatma Gandhi.

In the afternoon, the Hindu shopkeeper and his servant went back to their shop. Mahatma came back from wherever he had hidden himself and started rearranging his things. The madman got up and looked around as if nothing had happened. Mahatma offered him a

cup of tea. Lest the Muslim appear to be more generous than him, the Hindu too gave the madman buns to eat and forced him to take a second cup of tea. By the time police arrived an hour later, Mahatma had straightened out the signboard and had hung it up. The whole incident was forgotten by the evening and people gathered under the tree as usual.

Communal disturbance in the suburb was a tame affair since it had rather strict rules and conventions, The scene of the disturbance had to be outside the street, near the tree, which was a public place. There was a limit to the damage to be done. The strictest rule was that no one would raise his little finger at Mahatma: not even speak to him harshly or impolitely. The rule had been broken only once, when a youngster, new to the game, had called the Mahatma a Muslim. The others had taken the youngster to task and had sent him home crying.

In course of time, however, there were changes in these rules. Younger people took over leadership from the elders. The young leaders in the suburb started collecting money from the shops. When leaders from the city came to the suburb for organising a riot, the discussions were now somewhat different.

"What happened here during the last riot?" the leader asked.

The young followers were a little embarrassed to answer the question since nothing much had really happened during the previous riot. The clever one among them, however, saved the situation by making a slightly exaggerated claim. "We had ransacked all the Muslim shops."

"How many were killed?" asked the leader.

The question put them all to shame. There were quite a few deaths in the city, but in this suburb the only physical action was the beating of the madman. The clever one alluded to this incident and said, "We had broken the legs of a Muslim."

The leader did not seem to feel happy about it all and said, "You people seem to be an effeminate lot. Communal riot is a serious matter, but you are treating it as child's play. I thought that I would

spend fifteen minutes with you and brief you about the plans for tomorrow. I now see that I have to spend more time with you. Can you arrange some drinks or are your going to tell me that all the liquor shops are closed?"

The leader and his men spent the better part of the evening with the youngsters charting out detailed plans for the commotion. However, word was passed around in the morning among the people of the minority community that they should leave their houses. They all did, for the times were different now, but Mahatma said, "One does not leave one's house in times of trouble."

During that riot, the hooligans set fire to Mahatma's shop and did in fact break Pagal's leg. But it must be admitted that none showed any disrespect to Mahatma. Days after the riot, Pagal limped back from the hospital and Mahatma put his shop in order. Elections came and leaders started lecturing about communal harmony. Mahatma said, "Didn't I say that everything will be normal again?"

Everything was normal, but not for long. Besides Hindu-Muslim riots, one now saw Hindu-Sikh riots. 'Hindu-Sikh Bhai Bhai' slogans gave place to 'Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai' slogans. To Pagal's misfortune, he was now made into an Akali and the young hooligans ran after him calling him a langda Sardar, a lame Sikh.

That there was going to be another communal riot soon was known to all except the police. It was also known that this was going to be a severe one this time. The Muslims left the city and its suburbs and went away to villages which were expected to be safe. Even the Hindu tea shop owner locked his shop and went to his village. Elderly people of the locality went to Mahatma and asked him to leave the city for a few days, but he did not agree. "Last time too you were giving me the same advice," he said, "but as you know, nothing happened."

Next morning saw the hooligans running after Pagal. This time, however, they had knives in their hands. Even Mahatma failed to recognise them, for theirs were indeed strange faces. When Pagal came limping to the tea shop, Mahatma ran out of the shop straight

into the crowd to protect the madman. "Kill the bloody Muslim," someone shouted. A knife flashed and Mahatma fell down bleeding. There was pandemonium thereafter and in a minute everyone started running away and the place was cleared but for Mahatma's body. Pagal came over, kneeled before Mahatma and tried to pull him up, but Mahatma was dead by then.

A jeep drew up. For the first time Pagal spoke and shouted for police. However, the people who came out of the jeep were not policemen, but respected political leaders. They were not effeminate and chicken hearted like the youngmen of the suburb and were not scared of a dead body. Pagal looked up at them and asked for a doctor, but the visitors only laughed with derision. Two of them caught hold of the madman as a third filled up a canister with petrol from the jeep. They tied up Pagal to the banyan tree and poured petrol on him.

One of them said, "This man looks like a lunatic. Is he a Hindu or a Muslim?" The leader went to Pagal and asked him, "What community are you from?" Pagal did not reply. He had as suddenly become mute as he had started speaking.

They laughed again. The leader took out a cigarette, lighted it and took a few puffs. He smoked for a while and threw away the stub. Then he passed on the matchbox to the fellow standing next to him.

Translation: The Author

7

The Pukka Sahib

Tripathy Sahib had great plans but they did not materialise. The years passed, and the "bullock-cart" of government service having lurched to a preordained destination, he retired. Now, when he found time to think of the larger meaning of life, he had to admit that he did not have either the strength or the ability to execute the grandiose plans of his youth: nor did he have the desire to do so. There were times though, when he felt that a great deal had been achieved; what more could he have done? He had risen from an impoverished home in some obscure village to the top of the bureaucratic pyramid. His sons and daughters had distinguished themselves scholastically, found suitable jobs, got married and settled comfortably overseas. He had an enormous house to live in and a steady income from the investments he had made. How many people were so fortunate?

But no matter how determined he was to shake off the past, tiny memories invaded him, during unguarded moments: of his destitute father, who had been a priest: the humiliating environment of the village school: the long years in high school and college, where books had been the sum total of existence. The flow of life took a sudden turn when he entered service in a native princedom in Orissa. The ruler of the state, though barely educated, was a lover of English who owned an impressive library of English books. He took great delight

in entertaining British guests from time to time. On such occasions Ramapada Tripathy's command of the English language was a great asset and he became the ruler's advisor on all things English and his link with the British community. When he had first entered college his town-bred classmates had made fun of his English. This proved to be a blessing as Ramapada became obsessed with the desire to master the language. On joining service, he bought a radio and listened religiously to the BBC programmes in order to refine his English accent and gain the acceptance of his British superiors. In both these endeavours he was quite successful.

With the improvement in speech, came enhancement in status and salary; he moved from one feudatory state to another, rising ever higher in rank. Ramapada Babu evolved rapidly into Tripathy Sahib. The magic of the English language and contact with British officialdom turned him into an authentic sahib. Fortunately, his wife collaborated with him fully and Tripathy in his new incarnation distanced himself from village, family and childhood friends. His dress, manners and gestures were transformed and he even spoke Oriya with a British accent.

Tripathy Sahib had been loaded with honours during his career. He was reputed to be an able administrator. As a coloured Englishman he avoided contact with natives, specially those who worked under him. His social contacts were limited to his equals, white or coloured; his moments of leisure were spent in the club, playing tennis, or going out on the occasional shikar.

With independence round the corner, Tripathy Sahib was worried that the new leaders would dump officials like him, who had thrived on British patronage. But this group of officials adapted easily to the change and won the new rulers over; there was no decline in their influence. So much so that Tripathy Sahib's fear that his hard-earned mastery of the English language might become a liability proved to be unfounded; even after decades of independence there were no signs that the importance of the English language was threatened.

When Tripathy Sahib moved on retirement, from a government accommodation to his own house, the experience was both pleasant and painful. All his life had been spent in transit from one official bungalow to another. These bungalows had a certain character to which he had grown accustomed. On being transferred from one post to another, from one bungalow to another, he had never felt a stranger in a new home, because all his belongings used to be arranged in their proper places and his retinue of servants would take charge. Everything was always as it should be: his favourite foods were served on the familiar dining table and when he rose from his familiar bed, there was the comforting heap of files in the small anteroom. But the suburban home he had built for himself was different. Its architecture was not in his favourite British colonial style; it had been designed by a modern architect. Tripathy Sahib felt disoriented when he first moved in. He particularly felt the absence of his late wife; it was she who had supervised the construction, though she was never able to live in the house.

For the first time Tripathy Sahib became aware of all the debris that he had accumulated over the years: old office files that had never been opened; books loaned from libraries which he had never read and forgotten to return; addresses of welcome and farewell, elaborately framed; countless heaps of personal papers, shabby old clothing, battered trunks and suitcases. Tripathy Sahib decided to get rid of the unwanted junk before moving into his new home. Probing and poking into a bundle of old files he discovered a collection of yellowing papers that threatened to disintegrate on touch; all he could make out from the shreds was that they had been land records relating to his early years in a native state. Perhaps sale deeds for some lands that he might have bought or sold. But at this particular moment he was unable to recall the properties or relationships that had entered or vacated his life at various stages. The papers did not remind him of any specific transaction; however, he vividly remembered the overbearing face of the young ruler of the state. He did not feel like throwing the file away: the memories clung to him.

Ultimately, nothing was discarded; everything reached his new home. The room which his wife had intended as her prayer room and which he had mentally designated as his library was choked with a mountain of old books and papers. Seated at his desk in an inconspicuous corner, Tripathy Sahib felt he was surrounded by a travelling display of his mobile bureaucratic life. Any file that he opened evoked vivid memories, even though the matters they pertained to, were not always clear. Tripathy Sahib spent a great deal of his time in the library, surveying his own past. He felt he could spend the rest of his days scanning those files, reliving his memories, even if he had no particular goal for the last part of his life, no occupation, no friends. He also had the urge to put all those old experiences into writing.

The main question before him now was: how was he to pass his time? Even after retirement, he was given various minor assignments which kept him active. Though he did not have much to do, he went to the office religiously and observed regular hours. The work would be over in a couple of hours but he kept himself busy by creating unnecessary work for the staff in his small office, cooking up various problems for them to solve. Although he was successful in keeping himself fully engaged, he realised that he was not the same Tripathy Sahib to his former friends. He still had respect in official circles but he knew he was far removed from the seat of power. Even when playing cards at the club he was made to feel small; he still occupied his old table, but all eyes were now focussed on the adjoining table which was occupied by his successor.

Playing cards was his only relaxation. He had to give up shikar on account of the new laws protecting wild life. Likewise, he was forced to give up tennis. He continued playing when others of his age had already abdicated from the court. The new players were too young and agile for him and avoided playing with him if they could help it. When he did find an opponent he was invariably the loser, though he was sometimes allowed to win a game or two. How could he keep up his tennis under these circumstances?

Then his eyes began to fail him. One evening, when he was playing cards at the club, someone brought him a notice. Unable to read a word, he wiped his glasses clean, looked up at the light to confirm its brightness and finally defeated, handed the paper over for someone else to read. He went home and tested his eyesight trying to read prints of various sizes. He was unable to read anything except the headlines from the newspaper. He had never felt so helpless. Visiting the opthalmologist the next morning, he learnt that he had cataract in both eyes, but would have to wait until it matured before he could be operated upon.

The trouble with his eyes shattered his faith in his own fitness and ability. Although the treatment was simple, he would have to suffer for some months yet. The period of waiting was painful as he was forced to remain indoors. He could no longer dissect the morning newspapers; it was sheer torture to turn the pages over in his library, unable to decipher anything.

His only comfort at this time was his servant Basudev, who had been with him for ages. Tripathy Sahib had never tried to find out where he came from or whether he had a family of his own. He was a mere boy when he started working for Tripathy Sahib: first he learned to cook and then to read and write and lastly, he acquired the skills of driving, tutored by the government drivers attached to the sahib. His greatest gift was his economy of speech; he was so familiar with Tripathy Sahib's habits that he never needed orders: he knew exactly what had to be done. He rarely took leave to visit his village, but when he did Tripathy Sahib felt lost. When he retired it was only Basudev who remained to serve him. Tripathy Sahib was worried that Basudev too would grow old and become an invalid. He was afraid to ask Basudev to drive at night. It would be good to have a younger servant. But only the assurance of a secure government job would induce others to serve him, and this Tripathy Sahib could no longer provide. And so he was totally dependent on Basudev.

Failing eyesight made any movement even within the house difficult for Tripathy Sahib. Friends advised him to let out the rooms on the first floor of the immense building. Actually he could have managed with just three or four rooms; the rest were filled with unwanted junk and keeping them clean consumed a great deal of time and labour. The thought of letting out the first floor had occurred to him, but he felt it would compromise his dignity. Could he allow another family to share the space that he occupied? But as time went by and the feeling of helplessness and insecurity grew the idea was becoming less repugnant. He even told himself that a tenant might be of help in an emergency. If the tenant happened to be a doctor, so much the better.

Once the decision was taken, his friends and acquaintances started to look for a suitable tenant. But the isolation of the house from any convenient shopping centre was a constraint. When he retired Tripathy Sahib had been keen to settle on the outskirts of the city, far away from the hubbub. His wife had approved of the site because of the temple nearby. However; the decision appeared now to be wrong. Not just tenants, even friends kept away on account of the distance. A prolonged search yielded only one prospective tenant: someone wanted accommodation for an office. Rather unwillingly, Tripathy Sahib rented out the first floor, keeping the "library" under his own occupation. The furniture for the new office arrived, to Tripathy Sahib's great aversion. The people who came to the office on business intruded on his privacy. The only blessing was that there was no one to disturb Tripathy Sahib in the mornings and evenings, when the office was closed.

The siting of the office in his home, the deterioration in his vision and the consequent loss of mobility brought a total change in his lifestyle and attitude. For the first time he was made aware of his feebleness. His confidence in his own strength and ability vanished. Time hung heavy on him when he was no longer able to read the newspapers; and one day, because he had nothing better to do, he

walked to the temple nearby. There was no one in the vicinity. He took off his shoes, walked in and sat down on a stone inside the temple precincts. The touch of the cool morning breeze seemed to bring back numerous memories, particularly those of the temple in his village. But on this day the memories gave him pleasure. The sense of wellbeing lingered all day and Tripathy Sahib resolved to spend an hour or two each morning at the temple.

His contacts with his friends declined. When he stopped going to the club his friends occasionally called on him in the evenings, but now their visits were reduced. On some days Tripathy Sahib was all alone; the telephone was his only aide. He took to ringing up his friends and associates in the morning on returning from the temple; but as most people were then preparing to go off to work, no one had much time to spare for him. After a few minutes they would hang up, promising to call later. Only a few friends who had retired were prepared to talk at any length, but as they had nothing to talk about except their ailments he felt all the more depressed. At first he was reluctant to mention his failing eyesight and thus expose his own weakness, but gradually he fell in tune with the others and began to provide detailed accounts of his affliction and the treatment he was undergoing.

Another habit that he acquired at this time was an appraisal of his friendships. He began to think of his condition as a time of suffering and to treat only those persons who came to see him as true friends. Under such scrutiny the number of his friends showed a sharp decline; when the cataract in his right eye was removed, he cancelled quite a few names from his list of friends. With his vision partially restored, however, life appeared considerably brighter. He gave up listening to news broadcasts on the radio and returned to the joy of reading newspapers. Erring friends were forgiven and the hand of friendship was extended, once again.

One morning, while he was drinking tea after his visit to the temple, a young visitor arrived and introduced himself as a research scholar interested in the administration of the former princely states.

He said he would be grateful for an opportunity to go through the papers in Tripathy Sahib's possession. Tripathy Sahib was flattered that his collection of papers was perceived to be of such value, but he had no intention of sharing the treasure with anyone else. He explained politely to the young man that as he was planning to write a book himself he was unable to show him the documents. The visitor went back disappointed, but a few days later Tripathy Sahib received a letter from the state archives asking him to transfer the documents to them in the public interest and offering to pay a price for them. The letter annoyed him and Tripathy Sahib wrote back saying that he had no such documents in his possession. At the same time, he resolved to begin the task of writing his memoirs as soon as vision was restored in his other eye.

Some time later the cataract was removed. When the dressing was taken off and a new pair of glasses fitted, Tripathy Sahib felt he had returned to a familiar world. He had never experienced such agony as in these past eight or nine months. He went back to his club, his card games and his friends. He stopped visiting the temple: the newspapers took up all his morning hours. Though he periodically went back to his library he had no inclination to dig into those dusty old files.

Life trundled along lazily. His meals were served up properly on time, thanks to Basudev. The days were spent, apart from the evenings at the club, in siesta and gentle relaxation. He scrutinised the newspapers minutely in the morning, spoke for hours on the telephone to friends and acquaintances, sifted through the mail when it arrived and wrote the occasional letter to his stockbroker or his children. His friends often described the happiness they derived from playing with their grandchildren or writing to them when they were away, but Tripathy Sahib had no such happy tales to relate, as he had never been close to his children. It was only his wife who had kept up the contacts while she was alive; he had not been able to spare time for them out of his crowded office schedule. He was unable to forge new

links with them after his wife passed away. Their relationship was confined to the New Year greeting card and the occasional inquiry, regarding essential matters.

He had no desire at this stage to start anything new. He did not even want to think about his past, let alone write about it. The sessions in the library were gradually reduced. He had hoped to pass the remainder of his life at this gentle pace, free from any hassles. But one night, when he was in the bathroom, he felt his head reel. When he regained consciousness he found himself on the floor, his head bleeding. He thought he would call Basudev for help, but told himself he was better. He must have blacked out. He washed his face, rested briefly and was still debating whether to call Basudev when he felt dizzy again. Everything faded into darkness.

When he came back to his sense this time, he found himself lying in an unfamiliar room. A survey of the surroundings told him he was in a hospital. A sudden stab of fear shot through his chest. With eyes closed he tried to recall what had happened the night before. But the memory seemed to recede: had he been lying in hospital for days already? The door opened and a nurse walked in ; when he attempted to question her she gestured that he was not to speak. He felt tired and drowsy and dropped off to sleep again.

When he was carried out of the Intensive Care Unit to another room he realised he had suffered a heart attack. Basudev stood at his bedside, and near him was Umapada. Tripathy Sahib had had no contact for years with this younger brother who lived in the village. He had continued their father's priestly profession and looked after the family lands. He felt disturbed. Was this rustic, whom he had deliberately shut out of his life, trying to assert a claim? But when Umapada put a gentle hand on his forehead and asked, "Elder Brother, how do you feel now?" he felt a stirring in some remote corner of his heart. He had intended to reply with a faint wordless smile, but tears came unasked into his eyes.

The ambulance transported him back to his home fifteen days later. The doctors had prescribed a severe regimen for him. Bland, fat-free food; a long walk every morning and evening. No alcohol. Tripathy Sahib told himself quietly that he would refuse to live such a life; but within days he had fallen into the new routine. His timetable changed completely. He had been away from the club so long that he no longer wanted to return to it. He began to enjoy his walks, which he had started reluctantly on the doctor's orders. Those solitary early morning strolls along deserted roads, with the cool breeze fanning him, gave him intense pleasure. The temple was no longer just a milepost to measure the length of his ambulations; it became a destination.

His social life changed. As he no longer went out, his relationships were confined to those who called on him. Umapada visited him once in a while to inquire about his health, and this connection brought a number of old acquaintances from the village to his home. Umapada's son, who had a small medicine shop in the village, sometimes came to spend a day with him. Tripathy Sahib reminded himself that years ago Umapada had requested him to help his son find a job, but he had ignored the request. Sripada, his nephew, was a quiet, well-behaved young man; when he visited Tripathy Sahib he disturbed him as little as possible, spending most of his time in Basudev's company. Once, when Basudev fell ill, Tripathy Sahib did not know what to do; but fortunately, Sripada arrived and took charge of everything. Tripathy Sahib found himself wishing that he had such a strong, active young man living in the house with him.

One morning his eldest son, who had settled in the United States, arrived. He had been unable to come when Tripathy Sahib was unwell. He was accompanied by his wife and children, and they had taken rooms in a hotel to avoid inconveniencing anybody. The next morning Tripathy Sahib's American daughter-in-law took his two grandchildren sightseeing to Konark and Puri, and the son came alone to see his father. He had little time in hand and as Tripathy Sahib

wanted to discuss a number of urgent matters with his son, he had jotted down the points on a scrap of paper. His main problem was the management of his property and bank accounts. When he tried to speak to his son about his property and his shares, the latter appeared disinterested. Tripathy Sahib's assets, immense by his own standards, appeared negligible to his America-based son. Having listened to all that his father had to say, he said, "I don't want a share in all this; you can ask the others and do as you wish." Irritated, Tripathy Sahib contemplated bequeathing everything to some orphanage. His son saw the disappointment on his father's face and said, "Father, at my age I cannot possibly take on new responsibilities."

At my age? Tripathy Sahib looked at his son. He really looked old. How soon time had passed! Tripathy Sahib remembered his birth. He became even more aware of the passage of time when his daughter-in-law and the grand-children came to say goodbye. His granddaughter was a young woman of about twenty-five; soon she would get married and have a family. He would graduate into great grandfatherhood. He had looked forward to meeting his grandchildren and sharing a few happy moments, but the shadow of time had darkened everything.

He had another realisation on meeting his grandchildren. They were thoroughly American in their speech. When he spoke to them Tripathy Sahib felt that his carefully cultivated British accent was a fake. Then he realised that he had relapsed into his original native accent, which had not a trace of the BBC influence! When the children had left he picked up an English book and read out a page to himself, aloud. No matter how much he strained himself the British accent refused to come back. It deserted even his Oriya speech. When he spoke to Umapada, Sripada or Basudev, it was in the rustic colloquial Oriya he had used as a child. Others might not have noticed the change, but Tripathy Sahib appeared to have forgotten that he had once spoken Oriya as well as English with a BBC accent!

After his eldest son had spurned his inheritance, Tripathy Sahib too grew indifferent to all his possessions. He had planned to write to his other children and get their views, but now he felt it would be a

waste of time: they were bound to echo what the eldest son had said. He consulted his friends and acquaintances about giving away his properties to some trust. They generally recommended the trusts that they were themselves associated with; and scoffed when other organisations were mentioned, saying it would be like casting money into water: Tripathy Sahib was disgusted and postponed his decision.

The people in the office upstairs had made repeated requests for additional accommodation, which he had been ignoring; but this time, when the head of the establishment raised the matter again, Tripathy Sahib agreed to let out his precious library to them, as he was unable to climb the stairs to reach it. When the tenants asked him what was to be done with all the papers stored in the almirahs, Tripathy Sahib informed them that he had no further use for them: they were to be disposed of in any manner that the tenants thought fit. He handed over the keys to the room and the almirahs; and when the almirahs had been emptied and sent downstairs, he did not even ask what had been done with the papers.

Earlier, the days had appeared to pass slowly, but now the passage of time suddenly turned into a rush. He had no sooner taken his medicines for the morning and lay down in bed when it was time for the evening doses. The bills were hardly paid up each month, and the bills for the following month would arrive. The first floor was leased out to the office for a year at a time, but he had barely signed a new lease when the tenants arrived with renewal papers. Now he had no fixed time for sleeping or awakening. He had acquired the habit of sleeping, waking up and falling asleep again. He seemed to be living in an unreal world.

With the progressive decline in health came a corresponding reduction in the number of friends visiting him, from the city. On the other hand now it was not just Umapada who came to see him from the village: numerous other people visited him as well. Sripada frequently came to town on business and stayed with him. Then, when a tottering old man from the village came to his door, calling

out, "Ramu! Ramu!," the affectionate name by which his friends had addressed him in his childhood, Tripathy Sahib was suddenly thrown back into a vanished past, where he had not dared to venture for years. The old man's cry carried him back to the little stream in the village, the mango orchards, the ancient temple dedicated to the goddess, the chill autumn winds ushering in the festival of the full moon, the blazing afternoon sun. The images of childhood returned most vividly, even though recent events had grown dim.

Meanwhile, his daily routine had changed completely. The pain in his back and neck had forced him to sleep on a hard bed, without a pillow or mattress. One night he fell off the bed in his sleep and was told that at his age it was best to sleep on the floor. He had grown accustomed to the use of an airconditioner, but found that it aggravated his backache. He had it removed and slept all summer on a straw mat spread on the hard floor. Medical constraints and Basudev's increasing feebleness had made his diet exceedingly simple. When the drugs prescribed by his doctors offered no relief he consulted an ayurved practitioner from his village and was advised to take pakhala—boiled rice which had been soaked overnight. His old physician agreed that pakhala was the ideal food at his age.

The management of the household had changed as well. His movements were restricted to a few rooms, downstairs. The people in the office had been clamouring for yet more space. Finally, Tripathy Sahib agreed to let out the greater portion of the house, keeping just a couple of rooms for his own use. Signboards outside and inside the building proclaimed its total annexation by the tenant office, relegating Tripathy Sahib and Basudev to an insignificant corner at the rear of the house. The office even bought his ancient motor car, which was falling apart from disuse, for a song.

Tripathy Sahib did not want his affluent, healthy and anglicised friends to witness his decay. Gradually, all contacts with his friends in town, ceased. He was happy when Umapada came occasionally to see him. He had long chats with Basudev on a variety of topics. The news

on the radio bored him. He found it a strain to converse with outsiders and was aware that he often sounded incoherent. Psychological fear gripped him, along with physical infirmity. He felt most at ease during Sripada's brief visits.

The only consolation was the swift passage of time. Often, he was unable to tell whether he had just woken up or was about to fall asleep. Dreams and reality merged. He would sometimes dream of Sripada and find him standing by his bedside, holding a glass of water. In his dream, he walked past the temple in his village and woke up to the sound of the temple bells in his neighbourhood. Life became a mosaic of light and shadow in which past and present mingled to form an indeterminate landscape.

Tripathy Sahib was sleeping lightly that afternoon. For sometime past he had stopped using elaborate clothing: even a simple dhoti seemed cumbersome to him. He had only a rough hand-spun gamuchcha wrapped around himself. In a bronze bowl by his beside was the pakhala left over from his lunch. He had not shaved in days, finding the task tedious. He looked very much like his late father, the village priest. The dreams that came to him now were of his childhood in the village. He dreamt he was running through muddy rice fields; he had slipped and fallen, and someone in the distance was calling him by his name: "Ramu! Ramu!" The call woke him up. He opened his eyes and looked around, but could see nothing clearly inside that closed room. But the ringing of temple bells in the village could be heard, very clearly.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

8

Empire

Raghupati was reputed to be an honest, dedicated and able officer. But the qualities most people knew him by were his strictness, his bad temper and harsh language. He reinforced this choleric image by wearing thick-framed spectacles, smoking a cigar and keeping a dog. The animal was as bad-tempered as his master and greeted visitors by growling and baring his teeth. Wherever Raghuppati went, he took his dog along and people said the brute was a living symbol of his master's character. Although Raghupati never kept a gun or any other weapon, he had two pairs of glasses, one for reading and the other for distant vision; while he wore one he held the other in his hand and it had the stopping-power of a loaded revolver. People scurried out of the way hastily on seeing him. Although everyone praised him for his work, no one ventured close—unless it was absolutely necessary.

After he took over as District Magistrate, the tone of the administration changed. His predecessor had been courteous and soft-spoken, popular and god-fearing, but wholly incompetent. After Raghupati's arrival the doors of the office started to open on time. Files which had lain dead for years came to life and one no longer found dust or cobwebs in the office. When people spoke about the previous DM they referred to him as a "good man", and this description implied his incompetence as an official; likewise, when

Raghupati was described as a "good officer", it was understood that as a person he was the reverse. This would suggest, though it would be hard to sustain an argument, that one cannot be a good man and a good officer at the same time!

Be that as it may, no one could dispute Raghupati's awesome efficiency in the office. His seriousness and discipline were not confined to his work but had influenced his personal and family life as well, as a result of which his home was a miniature of the district administration; his wife, children and servants had their respective places in the hierarchy. For instance, Raghupati dealt with his wife as he would with any Class II subordinate, while his children never rose higher in his estimation than Class IV employees. In short, Raghupati was an absolute monarch and his home, together with the rest of the district, was his empire.

The one discordant element in this ideal setup was his youngest daughter. She was ill most of the time, afflicted by a variety of ailments, and her physical growth did not match her age. Her health did not improve despite intensive treatment, and this was a source of anguish for Raghupati. Years of treatment by eminent specialists at famous hospitals and clinics proved ineffective. Now, after trying out all kinds of indigenous as well as imported systems of medicine, Raghupati had stopped consulting physicians. Those that he turned to, when the doctors had disappointed him, were god-men, practitioners of occult arts, astrologers and the like.

Before long Raghupati's subordinates had discovered this one chink in the boss's armour. They tried to court his favour by bringing over varieties of sadhus and holy men to his home, which became a haunt for people with matted hair and beards, in ochre robes. However, Raghupati never allowed this unfortunate circumstance to affect his work. He reached the office precisely at ten every morning and worked all day with the utmost concentration and efficiency. He regularly went out on tour, throughout the district and these visits created terror among subordinates in outlying places. He was now on

one such tour, inspecting a subordinate office and the incompetent official in charge of the establishment stood facing him, bathed in sweat, calling upon his favourite gods for protection. When Raghupati questioned him about the office he could only stammer; he coughed, gulped, scratched the back of his neck, but the answers did not come. Raghupati's temper was rising visibly and the poor subordinate was certain that before long he would go up in flames. He waited for a chance, and as soon as it came he pulled out the unfailing weapon which he had been hoarding, for just such an occasion.

For a brief moment, the barrage of words from Raghupati had been halted and gathering up his courage, the man said, "Sir, Pashupati has been waiting to see you."

"Who is Pashupati?" Raghupati thundered, his voice dark with irritation.

The subordinate, who had been unable to speak, suddenly became loquacious and started to describe Pashupati with a hundred tongues. Pashupati was a mere peon in that office, but he was famous throughout the region for his spiritual powers. He had in his possession a number of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts on astrology and other occult sciences, and on any holiday his home was crowded with help-seekers who came to him with all kinds of questions. He would consult his books, make planetary calculations and find solutions to all their problems.

Having said this, the subordinate glanced at Raghupati to gauge the effectiveness of his weapon. But it did not seem to be working; Raghupati knew too much about god-men to be easily impressed.

The subordinate changed his strategy.

"Sir, Pashupati was suspended some years ago," he said.

"Why?" Raghupati asked with mild curiosity.

It was working! The subordinate informed Raghupati that Pashupati had suddenly left the office, without applying for leave or informing anyone, and wandered off into the Himalayas to practise austerities. Not even the people at home knew where he was. Then,

later, someone from his village who had gone on pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath saw him on a remote mountain pass, mounted on a gigantic he-goat. Five years later he returned to the village of his own accord. His services had been terminated, but hundreds of people recommended that he be reinstated. Including a minister.

Raghupati was about to ask under which provision of the service rules an employee who had been away without leave for five years could be reinstated. The man read the question in Raghupati's face and continued, "The minister's nephew had been suffering from asthma for years, but Pashupati healed him within a week."

A doubt rose in Raghupati's mind. Was this lazy, incompetent fellow trying to cash in on his weakness? If so, he would resume his inspection of the office. But the point about the minister's nephew made him waver. Before he could decide, the subordinate had clinched the issue by summoning Pashupati and got him to stand in front of the boss, hands joined together reverentially.

Raghupati was disappointed. Dressed in khaki livery, and without a beard, the man looked every inch an office peon. However, he decided to terminate the inspection, gathered up the papers on the desk and turned his attention to Pashupati. Tea and biscuits arrived, making the transition easier; the atmosphere grew relaxed and the subordinate officer started to talk with easy assurance.

"What do you say, Pashupati? The sahib's daughter will recover, won't she?" he asked the peon, glancing sideways at Raghupati.

Pashupati closed his eyes and chanted the names of God. "It's all His will!" he said.

The words were ambiguous and not particularly reassuring to Raghupati. The subordinate asked again, "When should the sahib come to you then?"

"Whenever huzoor wishes," Pashupati replied, referring to Raghupati.

"How about tomorrow? It's a Sunday. Your puja will be on tomorrow, won't it?"

"How can we not have puja on a Sunday?" Pashupati replied. "And tomorrow is the night of the full moon as well. Huzoor can come tomorrow."

Asking the peon to go, the subordinate studied the expression on Raghupati's face. He had not been completely won over yet. Giving him no time to think, the subordinate said, "It's Sunday tomorrow, Sir. Pashupati's house isn't too far away. I think, Sir, there's no harm in giving him a try."

Raghupati was unable to refuse. He only said, "But I don't have the horoscope with me."

Pashupati was summoned again and the subordinate asked him, "Sir will visit your village tomorrow. Is it necessary to bring his horoscope?"

"It will be enough if you can tell me the date of his birth and the zodiac sign."

"Very well, you can go," the subordinate said. Turning to Raghupati, he asked, "Sir, do you remember your date of birth?" When Raghupati confirmed this he got busy making arrangements for the visit to Pashupati's village next day. It was decided that they would leave early in the morning so that they could get there before the sun got too hot, and return the same evening.

Pashupati the peon was as much a shirker as his boss in the office. The subordinate official had no faith in his alleged powers and had never visited his village nor consulted him. So that night he gathered all the necessary information about Pashupati's village, told the driver how to get there and arrived early next morning at the bungalow where Raghupati was camping. It was the beginning of winter and the mornings were slightly chilly. Raghupati put on a suit, got his dog ready and emerged from his bedroom precisely at seven a.m. When the driver suggested that they start immediately as the crowds would begin to gather at Pashupati's home, the subordinate said, "Nothing to worry about. I'll see to it that Sir is attended to first."

The peon's village was quite some distance away and the road was in bad shape. It took a while to get there. The sun grew hot and the dog, seated beside Raghupati, began barking for no reason at all. Before Raghupati could quieten him the subordinate said, "There are some shrub jungles ahead and Pashupati's village is just beyond them." But they passed the shrub jungles and picked up the road again and then some more jungles came; the subordinate tried to divert Raghupati's attention and keep him entertained by talking about all kinds of irrelevant matters.

When they reached their destination the morning was well advanced. Raghupati's face had turned slightly red with heat as well as anger and the dog had resumed barking loudly. A fairly large crowd had assembled. Raghupati got out of the car, irritated by the heat, the faint rumblings of hunger, the garrulous subordinate and the barking dog. Some other subordinate official from the office, who had been awaiting their arrival, greeted them. They were told that they would have to walk to the peon's house at the other end of the village, through narrow lanes and throngs of naked children. Raghupati was thoroughly uncomfortable inside the black woollen suit, now sodden with perspiration, though he was an object of wonder for the villagers. They passed through a gate erected in the middle of the village and Raghupati felt certain it had been put up in his honour; but he was disappointed when he saw the streamers of coloured paper leading from the gate to the peon's house. Someone informed him that the decorations had been put up to celebrate the puja on the night of the full moon.

"Who has brought that dog here?" someone asked in a loud and indignant voice. Raghupati's footsteps came to a halt; he turned round and saw a couple of men obstructing the progress of his dog, which was about to pass through the gate. His subordinate said in a low voice, "English dog—belongs to the sahib; let it pass." But the people on guard said, "No, the master's sanctuary begins here. No dog or cat, no fish or meat is allowed." Raghupati glared for a moment at

the man who had the temerity to equate his dog with meat, fish or cats, but the next moment he recovered his poise and walked on, after entrusting the dog to yet another subordinate's care.

Another two steps, another gate and the path veered to the right. The place was piled high with the shoes and slippers of reverential devotees. "Sir, you can keep your shoes on," said the guiding subordinate, but remembering the episode of the dog, Raghupati took his shoes and socks off, although it was extremely unpleasant to walk in his bare, sweaty feet on that dusty path. Likewise, he had to curb his desire to light up a cigar and take a puff; the absence of his dog and shoes had robbed him of his boldness.

They had to stoop low in order to enter the thatched hut which housed the master's shrine. A tiny canopy on one side of a little courtyard, underneath which, on an elevated platform, sat the peon Pashupati in the lotus posture, amid a pile of palm-leaf manuscripts. Oil-lamps twinkled and joss sticks smouldered all around him. Freshly bathed, dressed in a dhoti of raw silk, his forehead smeared with sandalwood paste, Pashupati was engrossed in reading one of the ancient manuscripts, thick glasses over his eyes, muttering something to himself. Below him sat the many devotees who had come to him with their problems, looking raptly at him. Most were illiterate villagers who had come to Pashupati hoping to be cured of a variety of afflictions; among them was a single well-dressed visitor who seemed to have come from some far-off place and sat with bowed head. Raghupati's subordinate said, "Sir, please wait; I'll get a chair for you," Then he disappeared, and Raghupati realised he would not return. It was unlikely that a chair could be found in that village; and even if it was found it would certainly be a sacrilege to occupy a seat higher than the master's. Raghupati walked through that crowd of filthy villagers and squatted, cross-legged, on the ground next to the well-dressed person. It was difficult to find sitting room in that crowd and his English clothes were not suited to such a posture. The sun, directly overhead, shone full on him.

Raghupati sat looking intently at Pashupati, but the peon was busy reading the manuscripts and explaining things to the person sitting next to him, in a language which was unintelligible. The poor villager had come for relief from some incurable disease, but Pashupati told him, "According to the book, your troubles arise from a chakra. Is there a chakra in your house?" Raghupati thought to himself: what answer would he have given if the master had asked him this question? But the villager gave a simple reply: "No" On hearing this answer Pashupati took some freshly plucked leaves and rubbed the manuscript vigorously with them; then, adjusting his glasses he asked, "No chakra? Is there a chitra then?" When the man said "No" once more, Pashupati said to another man sitting beside him, "Call my brother, will you? Maybe he can read what's in the book." Pashupati's elder brother, who assisted him in interpreting the books, came and rubbed some more leaves into the book, adjusted Pashupati's glasses over his own eyes, tying the ends around his ears with twine and tried to decipher the mysterious word that had baffled Pashupati.

After a long time Pashupati turned his head towards Raghupati, who felt sure that the peon would attend to him immediately and solve his problem. But as soon as their eyes met, Pashupati looked away; taking the book away from his brother he trained his own eyes on it, trying to decipher it. Raghupati felt the urge to get up and walk out; he would find the fawning subordinate and give him a piece of his mind, as well as demolish his character-roll; and as for the peon's illegal reinstatement in service, he would ensure that it was cancelled. But the crowd of devotees waiting breathlessly in the hot sun, the sanctified master in his raw silk dhoti, crowned with red sindoor and sandalwood paste, the piles of ancient palm-leaf manuscripts, drove such thoughts out of his mind; and as he looked, with a slight feeling of awe, at the peon seated on his throne, he could see the face of his own daughter and the imagined face of the minister's nephew who had been healed by Pashupati.

Just then Raghupati saw his obsequious subordinate, standing comfortably in the shade on the verandah. He glared at the man before he could avert his gaze and make good his escape. Standing where he was, the subordinate signalled to him that he would not be able to wade through that crowd and reach Raghupati. Then, using his hands and fingers, eyes and lips in a variety of gestures, he conveyed the following message to Raghupati: Sir, I've sent someone to fetch a chair for you. Sir, please be patient; you will soon have a comfortable seat. I'II go to the master at once and ask him to attend to you as soon as he is through with this poor fellow. Your daughter will be cured, Sir.

Having signalled all this to Raghupati, the man quickly disappeared. Silently, Raghupati cursed him and all his ancestors. Because now Raghupati knew full well that in that place, even his own authority would be futile, let alone the power of the insignificant subordinate. In the empire existing within that low-thatched hut, the peon Pashupati was the only sovereign; those sitting below were his humble petitioners. Once Raghupati realised this truth he sat quietly, awaiting his turn.

Translation: Bikram K. Das

9

Our Daughter's Happiness

Early that morning Amaresh had said to his wife, "The old man just called." Nandini knew who Amaresh meant but still asked, "Who? What old man?" "Who else but Ray Babu. Who else would ring up so early and wake us up?" "Why are you always so critical of the poor man? We're lucky to have him for a friend. And, as for being an 'old man,' what do you think you are? He's only a couple of years older than you, at the most. Why did he call?"

Everything Nandini said was true. Ray Babu was probably not more than four of five years older than Amaresh, yet Amaresh considered himself middle-aged and Ray Babu, old. Amaresh knew, of course, that he was being unfair. Everyone agreed that Ray Babu was a good soul. All Amaresh's relatives and friends were lavish in their praise of his quiet, dignified and humble nature. And in fact Amaresh had no reason to disagree with them, but for some reason he was still suspicious. He would think to himself, there can't be another Mahatma Gandhi in our day and age!

Getting no answer, Nandini asked Amaresh again, "Why did Ray Babu ring up?" "He's threatening to come over this afternoon," replied Amaresh. "Didn't you ask him to join us for lunch?" "No, it's he who was inviting us for lunch, but I declined. How often can we eat at his place? Anyway he has agreed to come here."

Amaresh knew that Nandini would now start praising Ray Babu to the skies and be at it for at least five minutes. So he left saying he had work to do. Although he had retired and was not particularly busy, he preferred going back over the stale news in the newspaper to having to listen to lavish praise for Ray Babu, all of which indirectly drew attention to his own deficiencies.

No, Amaresh had no reason to be disagreeable or distant with Ray Babu. In fact, he should have been grateful to him. In accepting Bini, their daughter, as his son's bride, not only had Ray Babu not asked for any dowry but he had also spared Amaresh a great deal of expense. At a certain stage in the wedding preparations, Ray Babu had taken on responsibility for everything. Although Amaresh had happily agreed with Ray Babu's efforts to cut back on expenditures—finding a less expensive caterer, paring down the guest list, etc.—he had not appreciated Ray Babu's interference in the arrangements. However, with his help, Bini's wedding had gone off smoothly and with a minimum of expense.

Bini was their only child and Amaresh and Nandini often told themselves she was all they had. Who else was their money and their house for? They wanted Bini to be happy in her marriage. Even when Bini was a child, the couple wanted her to be happy. But of course their idea of happiness was different from hers. They would decide which dress looked better on her, which toy was right for her, which food she would enjoy, all irrespective of her own likes or dislikes. When she was a child, they had managed to impose their will, though sometimes she would break into tears. But as she grew up, she argued with them about these things. They had one trump card they would invariably play: "You're only a child, you don't know. Whatever we're doing, we're doing for your own good."

Bini passed her matriculation enveloped in the overwhelming love and concern of her parents. She wanted to study Arts, but they forced her into Science. Amaresh and Nandini admitted to themselves that this decision was somewhat selfish. As they were

often ill, they wanted her to become a doctor. After all, how many people can say they have a doctor in the family on call twenty-four hours a day? When they persuaded Bini to study Science they did not make their intentions clear, but Bini knew full well what they were up to. She had to study Science, but luckily for her she received such low marks that she could not get admitted to medical college Her parents scolded her, saying how much they had sacrificed to make her happy, and finally told her that from then on she should make her own decisions.

Bini changed from Science to Arts and her parents once again did their best to make sure she was happy. Now that she could not be a doctor and take care of them, their concern was that she be happy when she got married. They were a bit sad that she now paid them less attention; instead, she spent her time either with her friends or on her studies and music. It was as if she had become a different person. There had been a time when Bini was always at their beck and call. If they felt like amusing themselves they would call her and play with her until they felt bored. Whenever guests came, they would ask her to recite all the lessons and rhymes she had learned. If somebody arrived when they were playing with Bini, they would ask her to go inside immediately and she would silently do as she was told. As she grew up though, all this changed. Amaresh and Nandini always harked back to the days when Bini had been their ideal child, when she had obeyed them completely, when she had not argued with them, when she had been totally dependent on them.

As for marriage, they had thought that, like her friends, she would choose her own partner. This was a sign not so much of a liberal outlook as of Amaresh's inadequacy in finding a bridegroom. Besides, they thought that if she chose her own partner they would not have to supply a dowry. Although they had not discussed this with her, they felt she would soon fall in love. Finally, it did happen. Her silence at home, her lack of interest in anything else, her mood swings—sometimes happy, at other times sad—led Nandini to believe that Bini had fallen in love, but she could not guess who the boy was.

The year Amaresh retired, Bini completed her M.A. As they were becoming worried about her marriage, they forced her to reveal the name of the boy she liked. If they could have, they would have told her to which caste and which class the boy should belong. But that is not how things happen in love. The boy was not from the same caste; his family was poor and his complexion dark. From the day she introduced him to them, dissatisfaction and disagreement ensued, Bini was bitterly criticised for such a poor choice, as compared to so-and-so's daughter, who, in such-and-such a circumstance had chosen the right, good-looking upper-caste boy. They complained that she lacked common sense, intelligence, etc. But Bini was stubborn, and refused to give in to her parents' pressure.

Realising that scolding was not working the parents resorted to tears. Nandini reminded her how she had carried her for nine months and Amaresh recounted all his trouble and sacrifices for her. She was told how Nandini had watched over her when she was sick, how Amaresh had done everything he could to get her admitted to a good school and how much they had cried when she had fallen from the verandah and broken her arm. In all of this there was one recurring theme: that parents always know what's best for their child.

Finally it was Bini who gave in. Once she had said 'yes' the smiles returned to her parents' faces, regardless of how she herself felt. Nandini consoled Bini, "You've been spared a lifetime of suffering. Wait and see how we arrange your marriage."

Finding a boy for her was easier said than done. They sought the help of relatives, but to no avail. Those who had criticised her and given advice to her parents when she had been in love were no longer anywhere to be seen. Instead, they told Amaresh that it was difficult to find a boy for her since people knew she had fallen in love with someone else. And those who claimed to be friends of the family explained away their inability to find a suitable boy by saying that Bini had a dark complexion. Someone suggested they should put a matrimonial advertisement in the newspaper.

There were seventeen responses to their advertisement describing a girl, M.A., 155 cm, slim, average complexion, of Kayastha caste and Mahishya gotra. Nandini and Amaresh went through the proposals excitedly. There were eight boys with the name Devashish. Weighing the pros and cons of all the letters—such as handwriting, grammatical errors, length, etc.—Amaresh rejected four and made a comparative study of the brief and highly suspect accounts of themselves given by the others. The task seemed insurmountable, since such disparate elements as monthly salary, height, place of posting, status of the family had all to be factored into the equation. If at one moment he liked the scientist in America, than at another it seemed the bank employee in Bombay was better. It was while Amaresh and Nandini were trying to reach a decision that Ray Babu appeared out of the blue and solved their problem.

One fine morning a well-dressed older man entered their drawing room, loudly asking if Amaresh Babu was home. Before Amaresh could answer, the visitor sat down on the sofa and said, "I apologise for disturbing you like this, Still, as your neighbour I think I may be allowed such liberties." Amaresh wasn't wearing a shirt and wanted to go and put one on. Realising Amaresh felt awkward, the gentleman said, "Please don't bother to get dressed, I'll leave in two minutes after having had a cup of tea with you." When Amaresh sat down, feeling a little irritated, the gentleman introduced himself, "I'm T. K. Ray. I live nearby. I retired as a professor five years ago. I know that you've also retired, and so I thought, 'Let me come and spend some time with you'." Then Ray Babu started discussing current affairs in the newspapers. Although the uninvited visitor's idle talk made Amaresh feel restless, out of politeness he went to ask Nandini to make some tea. She had been listening to everything and wondered why Amaresh was showing so much hospitality to someone who was a complete stranger. The man who had said he would sit for only two minutes stayed a full forty-five. Although Amaresh learned nothing of the gentleman during their chat, Ray Babu, through his pointed questions, was able to gather all the information he wanted about

Amaresh. Even after Ray Babu had left Amaresh could not figure out why he had come. Nandini scolded him saying the man might be a cheat, a rascal, a thief or even a dacoit. However hard Amaresh tried to convince Nandini that the man lived nearby and that he had given him his full address and telephone number, she was not ready to believe him, Still, Amaresh had no clues as to what the man really wanted. He even thought of calling him up to find out.

Before he could do his, the phone rang. In a soft voice, Ray Babu said, "This morning I committed a great blunder. Being a talkative man, I forgot to tell you the purpose of my visit." Amaresh asked a bit hoarsely, "What purpose?" "Such matters can't be discussed over the telephone. I'll have to come to your place again. Will you be there this evening?" "I'm not sure, Tell me what your purpose is." "I went to see your daughter but left without having done so." When Amaresh told Nandini, who was standing beside him, she asked him to invite Ray Babu to their place that evening. Once Amaresh had put down the receiver, Nandini said, "Don't you understand? He came to see our daughter for his son." After that Nandini got busy getting ready to receive Ray Babu in the evening.

By the time Ray Babu arrived, everything was ready: the drawing room had been tidied, there were flowers in a vase, Amaresh had put on a clean shirt and Nandini was dressed up as if she were going out. Arrangements for tea had been made and Bini had been asked to be suitably dressed. Ray Babu arrived on time. After they had received him, Ray Babu said, "Please forgive me for coming over this morning. It wasn't the proper thing to do. And once I was here, I should have immediately told you why I'd come." He went on to explain. The circulation manager for the paper to which Amaresh had given the matrimonial advertisement was Ray Babu's friend, and Ray Babu had got Amaresh's address from him. Amaresh was not pleased and it could be seen on his face. But Nandini said, "You did the right thing. You saved the time that would have been spent on corresponding back and forth."

Within no time, things became more relaxed and Ray Babu, with the active support of Nandini, began to behave like an old friend of the family. Amaresh secretly hoped that once Bini met the gentleman she would disapprove of him, but Ray Babu won Bini over too and she took to him very easily. This both saddened Amaresh and made him angry, since lately Bini had been less free and open with him. When, after some time, Bini showed signs of getting up, Nandini looked at her and said, "Why are you in such a hurry? You've nothing else to do." But Ray Babu said, "Why force her to stay here? She's young; let her do her own things. Why should she stay here and be bored with us?"

After Ray Babu left, Nandini and Amaresh discussed what had happened. Nandini said, "Why waste time? Let's tell him 'yes'." Amaresh became irritated. Nandini always behaved like that; when she went out shopping, she would say about the first thing she saw, "This will do: let's buy it." Amaresh said, "We should look at all the letters we've received." "While you're busy choosing," replied Nandini, "this nice boy will slip through our fingers." "How do you know this one is the right one?" "Ray Babu is such a nice man," she answered, "his son must be good too, Instead of our going to his place, he has come to ours. How many people would do that? Where else can we find a boy working in America and, what's more, without having to provide a dowry." "In such matters," said Amaresh, "we shouldn't be in a hurry. First of all, I'm suspicious of this Ray Babu. Who's ever heard of a man coming to the girl's house after secretly obtaining information from the office of the newspaper. Nor should we be taken in by someone who is such a smooth talker. That aside, what do we know about the boy, who has been in America for ten years? He must be quite old. Not only that, but one can't be sure that he hasn't been married already in America."

This last remark silenced Nandini. She knew of two or three cases where after the boys went back to America with their brides it became known that they had earlier been married to white women. And so Nandini said, "Find out what you can about Ray Babu."

Amaresh learned to his surprise that Ray Babu was well-known in the neighbourhood and that everyone had a high opinion of him. Some even suggested that Amaresh should immediately agree to the proposal blindfolded. He asked everybody about Ray Babu's son, but nobody knew anything about Ray Babu's family or children. Nobody knew how old the son was or what he did, but they all agreed that Amaresh should marry off his daughter to him.

Ray Babu now began frequenting Amaresh's house, and took over responsibility for Bini's wedding, behaving as if the marriage had been settled and only the arrangements needed to be made. In due course, Amaresh learned more about Ray Babu. He was a widower and Tutlu, or Devashish, was his only child. The son was a quiet boy, with a good job in America. If Bini was to marry him she would no doubt be happily settled. But Amaresh could not bring himself to like the middle-aged, ruffian-like man he saw in a photograph Ray Babu had given him. Nandini too was taken aback but, afraid that Amaresh might create problems, tried to diffuse the situation by asking, "Is it possible to really know what somebody looks like from a photograph?" Amaresh was about to say something when she added, "After all, our daughter is not such a beauty herself."

Now Ray Babu, sitting in Amaresh's house, was drawing up a list of things to be done for the wedding. At first, Amaresh was not happy with this, but when he saw that Ray Babu was prepared to pay most of the expenses and cut back expenses for other things, he resigned himself to it and even welcomed the interference. Within days Ray Babu had arranged everything; on which day Tutlu would arrive, where the marriage ceremony would be held, how many guests would be invited, how expenses could be reduced, etc.

The other aspect which pleased Amaresh and Nandini was that Bini had accepted Ray Babu. They credited themselves with saving Bini from a terrible fate. Nandini kept on enumerating Bini's misfortunes had she married the boy of her choice, comparing them with her life once she had married Devashish, and how she would

happily settle down in America—although Nandini in fact had no idea what life in America was like. Amaresh, though, sometimes brought her back down to earth because of his reservations about Ray Babu. Even after such a long time he had not been able to rid himself of the doubt and displeasure that had entered his mind at their first encounter. He still had the feeling that there was another man hiding behind the facade of a gentleman, and that he should unmask him, but he had not been able to do it. He could not tell his feelings to anybody else, because, in the meantime, Ray Babu had won them all over. Yet sometimes he would share his misgivings with Nandini. They should have been told right from the beginning how old Devashish was, what his job was, how much he earned, etc. After all these days, it was not possible to ask such questions. They knew there were problems getting a visa to take one's wife to America. They never talked about this with Ray Babu, but sometimes Amaresh would ask Nandini, "Are we doing the right thing?" Confronted with such an unexpected question Nandini would fall silent and look at him blankly. Quickly collecting herself, she would answer, "You've got a rotten mind. If you don't believe me, ask your friends." Vexed, Amaresh would go back to the sitting room and continue discussing the wedding arrangements with Ray Babu.

Soon, the wedding day was at hand and Amaresh became very busy. All the work—printing the cards, writing the addresses, hiring the Kalyanmandap for the wedding ceremony and arranging for a caterer—was carried out with the help of Ray Babu, who kept an eye on everything and made sure that nothing was amiss. As a result Amaresh's expenses for the marriage ceremony were much less than he had expected. Anytime he was worried about running short of something. Ray Babu would supply what was needed from his own house.

The day finally came when Amaresh went with Ray Babu to the airport to receive Devashish. Seeing him for the first time Amaresh was disappointed, but he consoled himself that appearances are not really important and that what matters most is character. Character is

everything in a human being. But what did he know about Devashish's character? When he arrived back home, after dropping Ray Babu and his son at their place, it was late at night. Nandini was waiting up for him and when he came in, she asked how the boy was to look at. It was not right to call Tutlu a boy, but not in a mood to argue with Nandini at such a late hour, he only said, "Fine, just as you thought."

In spite of all his misgivings, he was really touched by Ray Babu's conduct on the day of the marriage. He felt warmth and respect for Ray Babu and rebuked himself for his earlier suspicions. Not only did Ray Babu not create any problems, but he saw to it that everything went well, as if he himself were the one giving away a daughter in marriage. He busied himself with looking after the guests. The marriage went smoothly and Bini left for Ray Babu's house.

After Bini had gone, when they were alone for the first time, Amaresh and Nandini discussed the marriage. Devashish had arrived only a day or two before, and they had not had a chance to get to know him well. They were worried about how Bini had taken it all. They had decided to go to Ray Babu's house and see for themselves, when Ray Babu himself arrived with his son and daughter-in-law. This time too Ray Babu charmed them and there was no time for Amaresh and Nandini to talk to Bini in private. Two days later, Ray Babu sent a message that Devashish was going back to America in a week and would send for Bini once he had arranged for her visa.

This again created suspicion in Amaresh's mind. He asked Nandini, "Did you know Ray Babu was planning to send Devashish to America first and that Bini would only go later?" Hearing him complain she replied, "You yourself said that it is difficult these days to get a visa to go to America. Why are you blaming Ray Babu? If you were so concerned, why didn't you discuss all this with Ray Babu before the marriage?"

After a while, Nandini's tone softened. "Devashish is a good boy," she said. "He'll soon arrange for Bini's visa." Faced with Amaresh's

silence, she asked, "Didn't you like Devashish?" Amaresh said, "No, no what's there not to like? Where else could we have found such a good husband for Bini?" Devashish was quiet and gentle, and like Ray Babu he was also friendly; there were no ground on which to fault him. Still, Amaresh was not able to set his mind at rest.

After Devashish left to go back to America, Ray Babu often took Bini to her parents' house, but each time Amaresh and Nandini were forced to face the fact that Bini was no longer theirs. She had become more serious. She never spoke to them about the old days; she only talked about Ray Babu's household, which did not interest Amaresh in the least. Their relations were now so distant, that even though she wanted to, Nandini could not ask Bini directly whether she was happy in her marriage. The day Bini addressed Ray Babu as 'father' in front of Amaresh, he felt completely heartbroken and angry with Ray Babu.

One day, Ray Babu phoned to say that he would come at noon. Nandini busily began preparing food, but Ray Babu arrived along with Bini, bringing Chinese food. For Amaresh this was simply another of the ways in which Ray Babu always kept him in his debt. But, as always, Ray Babu entertained everybody and the hours spent in his company were pleasant. He recounted the problems he was having obtaining Bini's visa, but reassured them that he should be getting it soon.

After Ray Babu and Bini left, Amaresh and Nandini were lost in thought. They tried to guess from her words and behaviour whether she was happy. Although there was nothing to indicate otherwise, she seemed to have wilfully distanced herself from them for having married her off; her silence seemed both a protest and an accusation. Although they did not tell each other what they were thinking, both were disturbed by the same thought. That day, seeing Nandini brooding after Bini had left, Amaresh asked her, "What do you think?" Wiping her face with the fringe of her sari, Nandini responded with another question, "About what?" Amaresh decided not to say anything, but he was worried about Bini. "How long will Bini stay with that old man?"

he asked. Nandini herself was less satisfied with Ray Babu than before, but when Amaresh raised the question, she retorted, "What else can be done? He's trying his best." "Should I see what I can do?" asked Amaresh. Nandini laughed, " You're not able to do anything. What could you do to help get the visa? When a capable man like Ray Babu can't manage, what could you do?" Amaresh answered, "Who knows if he's telling the truth?" "Your mind's rotten," she said. "You're always suspicious of everybody."

In fact, Amaresh's suspicions were unfounded. One morning a few days later, Ray Babu brought Bini's passport stamped with the visa from the American Embassy, adding that within a day or two the ticket Devashish had already mailed would also arrive. Though their worries were over, Amaresh and Nandini were saddened by the idea that Bini was leaving for a foreign country. Ray Babu became very busy with the arrangements for her departure. The tickets arrived, and he talked on the telephone with Devashish to fix the date she would leave. The day for Bini to say goodbye to her parents was approaching. Nobody had imagined that everything would happen so fast. Nandini reproached Amaresh, "Your nagging made it happen this quickly, otherwise our daughter would have been with us a little longer."

They accompanied Ray Babu and Bini to the airport and saw her off. Their eyes were full of tears, but Bini remained in full control of herself. It seemed to Nandini and Amaresh that she had become a complete stranger. There was no warmth or intimacy in her words of farewell. The time for her to leave arrived, while they were giving her inane bits of advice, such as telephone us, write regularly, don't forget to take your cold medicine. And then she went inside the airport and disappeared from sight.

Returning home after midnight and going to bed, Amaresh said, "I don't feel well." "It would have been better to have had her with us for a few days more," said Nandini. "It's not that," Amaresh replied. "Who knows if Bini is happy with Devashish and Ray Babu and this

marriage of hers." On hearing this, Nandini got angry, "You've been complaining about everything since the day of her marriage: you're overly suspicious of Ray Babu. Can't you see how happy Bini is? Where else could we have found a good boy like Devashish?" After a pause, Nandini added, "If there was a problem, wouldn't she have told us? We married her to such a suitable boy; what more could we, as parents, have done for her? I'm sure Bini will be happy."

They switched off the light to go to sleep. The events of the day had tired Amaresh out, and just as he was falling off to sleep he heard a suppressed cry from Nandini, "Listen to me; is our Bini really happy?" Amaresh heard the question but pretended to be asleep, although he knew that sleep wouldn't come.

Translation: Rabindra K. Swain and Paul St-Pierre

10

Homeless

His tea finished, Bibhu threw the clay cup against the ground, and stood up, straightening the cotton bag slung over his shoulder. No sooner had he stepped into the corridor than the train gave a jolt. But Bibhu knew the train's every movement. Unperturbed, he stepped over and around the people crowding the corridor and went on into another compartment, which was quite empty. People say that trains, no matter where they are headed, no matter at what time of the day, are always packed. But Bibhu knew that there are sometimes empty seats. When there are other hawkers might not do good business, but Bibhu could still sell his books. If the trains were not too crowded, passengers had time to browse and Bibhu got a chance to talk to them. He looked around the compartment and sat down opposite a Bengali couple. Taking a thick Bengali book from his bag, he handed it to them, saying, "You might not have heard of him, but this writer's promising." Leafing through a few pages, the man handed the book to his wife. Reading their faces, Bibhu knew what kind of books they would be interested in. He took out another, this time something popular. As expected, the man bought it. Taking his money, Bibhu wondered for a second whether he should talk to them or move on. The woman was beautiful. She wore an expensive sari and jewellery, but did not seem particularly fond of books. Bibhu got up to leave.

Bibhu's friends often asked him whether he ever got bored spending his life on trains day after day. How could they know that trains were worlds unto themselves? What could people whose lives were spent at the office, at home, in the market or with neighbours know about a world where life went by surrounded by strangers. Each new day brought new wonders. Would tomorrow's train be the same as today's? Each train not only runs through new countryside and new surroundings, it also runs with a new purpose. Even the passengers who spend the night in the train are not their old selves the next morning. Yet, Bibhu would not tell his friends all these things. Instead, he would just laugh away their questions and say, "You all live in cities; trains are my city."

There is nothing that happens in life that does not also happen on trains. In a decade of nomadic life—no, why 'nomadic'; trains are his home—Bibhu had seen everything, and then some: flirtations, love affairs, emotional breakups, business negotiations, theft, rape, murder. He had had the fortune, or misfortune, of seeing them all. A chill would run down his spine whenever he thought back to one particular event. The train had passed through the last big junction, and everyone was getting ready to go to sleep after dinner. Bibhu had decided to make one last round. He was crossing from a compartment into the chair car when he met a middle-aged lady standing in the doorway. She took a chocolate from a glass jar and gave it to him. He popped it into his mouth. She took out another for someone behind him. He looked around to see who was there. There was no one. When he turned back, the lady too had disappeared. A shiver ran through him. He entered the chair car and saw that everyone was in their seat, but the lady was nowhere to be seen. Nor was she in the nearby compartments. Terrified, he went to the attendant, a friend, and told him what had happened. His friend was surprised, "A middle-aged woman in the chair car?" He took the list of passengers from his pocket. There were three ladies in their forties on the list. Bibhu took note of their seat numbers and went to their places to check. The woman who had given him a chocolate was not one of them. He

thought that perhaps he had only imagined everything, but he still had the taste of chocolate in his mouth. He went back to the attendant, who calmed him down, telling him to go to sleep and that things would be fine in the morning.

During the years he had spent on the trains, he had become friends with many of the railway staff. They allowed him free passage, took care of his books, and, when he needed it, lent him money. They were like members of his family. Sometimes someone going off duty would invite him to stay the night, and occasionally he would accept. On their way home Bibhu would sometimes buy a bottle of liquor, if a shop was open, and they would talk late into the night in the small quarters in the housing development for railway employees. Such times were only an extension of his life on the trains, since the house would be close to the rail line. All through the night trains ran through his sleep, and his bed shook as if he were sleeping in a compartment.

The only change from this life came when he went to his sister's house in her village. She was his only living relative. She lived far away and Bibhu often grumbled because she did not live next to a rail line. His sister's children liked him and lovingly called him 'Barabula Mamu' or only 'Bula Mamu'—'wandering uncle'. As long as he was there, he felt close to them and to the villagers, and would share in the household chores. But hardly would a week go by than he would become impatient to be back at work. He would grow silent, and they would know that he was about to leave the village. The children would comment that their uncle had been bitten by the bug. Once he was off, there would be no news from him; he never wrote. They had given up complaining long ago, but they knew that one fine morning he would come back, and after a week or so go on his way again.

While in the village, he would help his sister's children with their studies. One day his sister asked him to stay on a little longer, until his nephew Dipu's examination was over. The request alarmed Bibhu; it was a ploy to keep him there. He declined, saying he had already stayed a week even though he had come only for a day, adding that he had a lot of work to do. His brother-in-law asked, somewhat

incredulously, "What work?" Bibhu became serious and replied, "You don't know how difficult my work is. I have to settle accounts with the bookshops or else they won't give me books on credit. And my things are with different guards and conductors on different trains. All that has to be taken care of." Here his sister chipped in, "Why should you do this kind of business? You could live with us, or we could build a house for you nearby, with the money you've deposited with us. If you'd feel ashamed sitting and doing nothing, you could help your brother-in-law in the fields." "Take up some other kind of work at my age!" he answered, "I don't think I'd be good at anything else. I'm quite happy selling books on the train." His reply had irritated his sister. "Why don't you just say you like living in railway stations and eating platform food?" she remarked. "You're right." Bibhu calmly replied. "How can you sleep if your bed doesn't shake? And what do you know about the food the hawkers sell? Next time I'll bring some for everyone."

That was how Bibhu would turn down her requests. Before, his brother-in-law used to tease him, saying, "Once he finds a woman, he'll stay home." But that time was long past. No one had succeeded in convincing him to get married. Now it would be difficult to find a bride for him. Once, when a girl from the village was back home after having become a widow after only a few months of marriage, it had almost come about. She was very quiet and also beautiful, and everyone was full of praise for her. Bibhu's brother-in-law and sister insisted that he should at least go and meet her. Though unwilling, he was taken to her house, and, in fact, she had appealed to him. She spoke in a quiet but steady voice of having been tortured by her in-laws after her husband's death. Bibhu liked everything about her. On their way home, his brother-in-law suggested he should agree to this proposal immediately, "We've known her ever since she was a child," he said. "You'd be lucky to have her as your wife." The girl's simple and solemn face flashed before Bibhu's eyes. Did he have any right to marry her, given his life of wandering? But that was not his real worry. He was afraid of being tied down. He would have to be in the village

all the time; that was what bothered him. Once married, how would he be able to leave her to do his work? What would happen to his life on the trains? He could not imagine being chained in a house. He did not give his answer immediately, but once back at work he wrote to say he would not get married. That was his last marriage offer.

Of course, it was not that he did not like the companionship of women. Sometimes, along with his friends, he would spend a night in Sonagachhi. The madame of the house they went to was an old, gentle and pious woman. Her girls were also simple and sweet. The place was not free from drunks and goons, but for Bibhu it was a place to relax.

There was liquor and cheap food, brought in from the outside. He would sleep there peacefully once the crowd thinned out after midnight, and in the morning he was back on he trains once again. For some years now Bibhu has been frequenting the place with a friend of his. The friend had a woman he saw regularly, named Meena, and they had paired Bibhu off with Arati, Meena's friend. Bibhu and Arati were now quite friendly, and they shared their joys and sorrows Once Arati's eight-year-old son had come from the village to the city, and Bibhu had spent a day taking him around and showing him the sights. Life continued in this way, but once Bibhu was not able to go and see Arati for a couple of days. When he finally did, he found her sullen and silent; she started crying and would not stop until she had extracted a promise that he would come and see her every other day. Once he had left her that night, he never went back again.

His sister was always warning him, "That's alright. You're young now and don't need anyone's help. But if you fall sick, who will take care of you?" He was well aware of the problem. Once he had taken ill and was lying on the platform. A railway employee took him home, and he stayed there for four days. After that he had vowed that if ever he fell sick again he would go some place where no one knew him; he did not want to cause his acquaintances any trouble. He had had plenty of similar experiences on the trains. Sometimes he had seen passengers who were dying with no one to help them; sometimes, even, bodies were found on the train. One time an unidentified body

lay on a small platform for two days. Bibhu knew what he wanted for himself; to lie down one night in a train only to be taken out the next morning as a corpse, creating no problems and causing no inconvenience to anybody.

But why should he entertain such unpleasant thoughts, especially when he was in good health? His days were going well. This very morning he had already sold two books. He had gone into a compartment and stood near a man who was reading. A strange rule is that only someone who already owns books buys more. The man put down the one he was reading, took Bibhu's books and looked at them all, one after another, asking him if he had a title or two he wanted. Perhaps so as not to disappoint Bibhu, he bought an inexpensive book. A woman sitting nearby asked Bibhu if he had children's books. Looking at the child accompanying her, he guessed her age, and said, "I'll be back with some children's books in fifteen minutes," mentally taking note of her seat as he left. In the next compartment, there were four people playing cards on a trunk set between two seats. He stood next to them, watching them play. One of the players got up and handed his cards to Bibhu, asking him to play his hand, saying he would be back in a few minutes. Very soon Bibhu was caught up in the game. When the player returned, Bibhu tried to give him back the cards, but the player insisted that he should finish the game.

By the time Bibhu returned from the end of the train with the new books, the child was crying. Giving the mother a book, he tried to console the child but she would not listen to him. Bibhu showed her things going past the window, showed her pictures in the book, but nothing seemed to please her. At last he took his handkerchief out of his pocket, rolled it into the shape of a mouse and made it move along his palm. As she watched, the child finally stopped crying but would not leave her mother's lap. When the mother chose a book for her, she threw it on the floor. Even after Bibhu picked it up she would not take it. The mother gave him his money and said, "Don't worry about her; what she needs is a good spanking."

That evening the mother and daughter got off the train as Bibhu was having tea on the platform. The child was smiling. Seeing Bibhu, the mother pointed him out to her, "Look at your book-seller uncle. He tried so hard to stop you from crying. Say hello to him before we leave." The daughter took her hands out of her mother's saree and folded them in a greeting, but she shied away when Bibhu looked at her . As the train was scheduled to stop there for quite a long time, he thought of seeing them off outside the platform. But his feet did not budge. What use was there in continuing such a relationship? There had been many other pleasant relationships in his life, but he had never followed up on any of them. People would offer him jobs; others, sales agencies. Once he met a man with a letter from his bother-in-law. The letter said that if Bibhu would marry the man's widowed sister he would receive all their property. There had been many proposals like this, but he had declined them all. What would he do with money? His life, as it was, was fine. What use would it be to become tied down to anything, whether a home, money, or even love.

If he had not met her again a few days later, he would not have remembered her face. On the train he would make friends with many people but once he got off he would forget them all. Someone would tell him they had met five years before and that he had sold him a certain book at half its price, while another would say, "You look exactly the same as you did last year. Instead of books you should be selling the medicine you take to stay young." Many such kind words. That day Bibhu was loitering on the platform when he met the mother and daughter again. There was a young woman with them, and they were inside a compartment. After some time, the woman and her daughter got off the train and the mother was talking to the young woman through the train window. While Bibhu was still trying to decide whether to go over to them or not, the little girl smiled at him. He had to go and see her. Greeting him, the woman said, "I'm lucky to have come across you. My sister is travelling on the train. I am worried as she has never travelled on her own. I've written to my brother to meet her at the station. Please keep an eye on her." Bibhu

looked inside the compartment. There was a girl in her early twenties, looking completely lost. After some time the woman asked Bibhu to come near the window as her sister was not able to see him properly. "Even at her age Rumi is afraid of everything," she said. When Bibhu went closer to the window, Rumi asked, "Where is your seat?" "Don't worry," he said, "I'II be in your compartment."

As the train started to move, he went over to her and said, "Wait here: I'll be back soon." "How can I stay on my own?" she asked. Making room for him she asked him to sit down. He did, and after some time thought of going to get his bag of books. Rumi was looking out the window. After ten minutes or so, when he was about to get up, she said, "I'm thirsty." Seizing the opportunity, he got up and offered to go and get her something to drink. He went to the conductor's compartment and put some books in his bag. Remembering that Rumi had asked for something to drink, he put down the books, picked up a bottle of water and took it to her. "What took you so long just to get me some water?" she asked. Taking a sip, she said, "The water tastes bad. Isn't there any orange drink on the train? I have some money with me." Bibhu smiled. "Take the water," he said, "you can have some orange drink at the next station." When Bibhu started to leave, Rumi asked him where he was going. "My business is selling books," he answered, " I have to make my round and try to sell some." "Show me your books," she said, "I'll buy one," Taking one book after another out of his bag, Rumi looked at them all. Finally choosing one, she said, "This one; how much is it?"

"Thirty-three rupees. But, thirty for you." "Thirty rupees! Who can afford such a price? Why don't you sell film magazines? I'd buy one." After some time Bibhu said, "Stay here, I'll be back soon. If I don't sell any books, how will I be able to eat?" She answered, "I'll take you to my brother's house. You can eat there . Once you've eaten something cooked by my sister-in-law you won't forget the taste. How much do you earn from your book-selling?"

"No set amount. One month's sales can be good, another's bad. If sales are bad, I have to go without food." "I know what you should do.

When you earn more money one month, save something from that for the future. That will support you the months you earn less. Don't you have enough common sense to do that?"

"Alright. From now on I'll put my money in a bank. Do you know of any banks?"

"What do I know about banks? You're grown-up and still you don't know where the banks are? If you lived near our house, I could have showed you one. Where do you live?"

"Me? On the trains."

"How wonderful! You can go wherever you want! Whenever you feel like it, you can get off at a station, have something to eat and drink orange juice!"

At that moment, the ticket collector entered the compartment. He knew Bibhu. Seeing him, the collector said, "The book you gave me last time was trash. I'll give it back to you tomorrow." Since Bibhu was talking to someone, Rumi looked out of the window. She was not listening, and did not hear the collector when he asked her twice for her ticket. Poking her, Bibhu told her to show her ticket. Without looking away from the window, she gave him her purse, saying, "The ticket is inside." He fished the ticket out from a mess of crumpled notes, a handkerchief, coins and keys. After it had been checked he gave her back the purse. "Keep it," she said. "I might lose it." When the train reached the next station, Bibhu noticed she was not listening to him. She seemed to be sulking. When he asked if anything was wrong, she turned away. Bibhu kept silent, thinking that she would settle down after a bit. As expected, Rumi soon opened her mouth. "You promised to buy me orange juice at the station," she said. When Bibhu got up, smiling to himself, she added, "I gave you my purse for safe keeping, and now you're leaving it behind! What if it were stolen? Take it with you."

For the rest of the journey, Rumi did not allow Bibhu to leave her side, talking to him all the time. Not only did he have to tell her everything about his life, but he also had to listen to everything she told him about hers. He learned who her enemies were, which

teachers were not very good, what kind of man she would like to marry, which film star was her favourite, and so on. When she finally reached her station Rumi insisted that Bibhu go with her—whether her brother was at the station to meet them or not—to her brother's house and have dinner.

Getting off the train that evening they looked around, but Rumi could not see her brother anywhere. Maybe, he had not yet turned up to meet her, since the train, which was usually late, had arrived on time. Bibhu had her sit on a bench, put her luggage beside her and gave her back her purse. Telling her he would try to find her brother, he went to the bridge over the tracks and looked back to where she was sitting. She was busy reading a film magazine she had bought.

No, there was no question of his going to her brother's house. But what if her brother did not come to get her? He was in a fix. He saw a man approaching her. Oh, what a relief! But Rumi did not get up. After talking to her, the gentlemen moved down the platform; he seemed to be looking for someone else.

Bibhu carefully came down the steps. Without looking over towards where she was sitting, he sneaked away to the other side of the platform, where there was a train facing in the opposite direction. Looking back, he saw Rumi still sitting on her own. He turned away and looked inside the train. He saw a child sitting in the compartment with a game board asking his father to play, but his father was busy talking to someone. The whistle went signalling that the train was about to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, Bibhu noticed Rumi's brother approaching her and that Rumi was standing up. As the train started moving, Bibhu jumped on to the train. He went into the compartment where the boy was, and said, "Come on, I'll play with you." He sat down and looked out of the window. He no longer could see Rumi and her brother.

Translation: Rabindra K. Swain and Paul St-Pierre

11

The Long Life of Poetry

Devnath opened his eyes amidst the light and sounds coming through the windows. These days he didn't follow a daily routine. He ate when he felt hungry, slept when he felt sleepy and got up when his eyes opened. He had slept well last night, and he felt fine this morning. He stretched his hand and picked up the pillow that had fallen on the floor, and put on his glasses kept on the nearby table. He could not see clearly; he wiped the glasses and realised that he would now have to get another pair. That reminded him of many other jobs which needed attention, and with an effort he banished all these from his mind. There was no point in keeping an account of all that he had forgotten to do. If something could be deferred till tomorrow, why do it today?

Hari Master's servant boy placed a glass of hot tea before him, as he sat near the table after washing his face. He was grateful to have such a loving family near him. Tea always reached him the moment he got up from bed; the thali came when he felt hungry.

Devnath took out a biscuit from a jar on the shelf, dipped it in his tea and looked at the wisp of faint smoke going up. He decided to take out warm clothes from the box tucked under his bed. There was a slight chill in the air since the last few days, but he had been deferring this small chore. He had not even read yesterday's newspaper until now. He picked it up from the table and ran his eyes over it. None of

the news interested him, and after turning the pages, he went back to the line he had seen in an advertisement for some furniture: ah, that home is indeed like heaven. Mulling over it for a while, he tried to recall the second line of that familiar couplet. No. it was of no use. It rhymed with an arrangement of words like ... where rules.... But what was the word before that? What rules? Beautiful furniture? Could he write a new line to rhyme with the first one? He had to rearrange the first line before that, with a mark of exclamation perhaps: Heavenlike, ah, is that home! If he wrote 'oh' in place of 'ah'? If he shuffled the words around: that home, ah, is heavenlike? Or, that home, oh, is heavenlike?

There was a time when all his time was spent playing around with words. His mind worked incessantly like a dictionary and a thesaurus put together. There was an unusual joy in substituting a new word for an old one, putting two or three-letter words in place of one having four and the other having two letters. Making up a line and breaking it up again. Moving around brackets and exclamation marks. There was an excitement in using old words to make up new proverbs. There was a perverse pleasure in rejecting alliterations that crept in so effortlessly into the composition.

And was the page-long live poem that finally took shape before him what he exactly wanted? Was it the same form inside his mind which had taken an outward shape now? How much did the recollection of the morning reflect the dreams of the night? When he read the finished poem, it sometimes seemed to be perfect, while at other times it seemed as if a lot had been left unsaid. It was like the painting of the eyes to complete the beautiful earthen image—the want of some special touch. The journey into the world of thoughts started all over again, waiting for a boon from the wish-fulfilling goddess of words. The pen again moved on the blank sheet. No more playing around with words, now it was the stratagem for a cold war with them.

Moving his eyes away from the world of the newspaper, Devnath looked around the harsh reality of his bed, table and chairs. Like him,

all these were aged and dilapidated. He suddenly recalled the famous easy chair of Rabindranath, although there was no similarity between the rickety old chair on which he sat and the fancy chair which had crossed the seven seas to reach Shantiniketan as a gift of love from an Argentinian lady. Still, out of context, Devnath imagined his own chair to be echoing the sentiments of Gurudev's chair—pitiful and sad, the silent suffering of emptiness pervades the house bereft of the beloved.

Unrelated lines of poetry entered his mind in this manner at times and tortured him. Sometimes a beautiful rhyme of few words would caress the innermost depths of his mind like the pangs of a lost love. Devnath woke up from his reverie and became circumspect again. Why should he disown his easy life and seek asylum in some false surreal world? He felt well today. It was sunny outside. He could easily walk up to the street square. No, he had no complaints against life. On the other hand, he must admit that fate had dealt him a decent hand. Otherwise, how could he have simply walked into his paternal house, had a tenant like Hari Master and a market conveniently located at a walking distance? He was even more fortunate to have the highway running near his village to facilitate the transport of iron ore to the steel plant, and a dhaba and a liquor shop in the market square to cater to the needs of truckers.

The boy placed the tiffin tray before him as he was about to change and go outside. Food was available at the dhaba in the market square but breakfast always arrived on time from Hari Master's house. Why should he eat outside? He finished breakfast and left the plate outside and came out of the house. He had only to take a short walk to reach the highway—an altogether different world.

The traffic on the road was getting heavier by the minute. One after another truck carrying iron ore raced away. One more line of poetry forced its way into his mind despite himself: the final deliverance of the prehistoric iron age. He could not recall the next line. There were words like primeval times, accursed men, which were

followed by other words like the turn of the wheel, steel , steel. It seemed like ages now. Steel was the only thing that mattered at the time—the social and political environs had been burning with the demands for a steel plant. Vociferous demands for steel had intermingled with the singing of the patriotic, 'Vande Utkal Janani'. That dream too was fulfilled in due course. The steel plant was set up. The green shoreline and the dense forests of the patriotic song gradually took a new shape. There was now a red layer of iron ore dust on the greenery on either side of the road.

The liquor shop would not have opened yet, but customers had started reaching the place early in the morning. Perhaps it was illegal to have a liquor shop in the place. Perhaps the crowded market on that square itself was illegal too. Devnath sometimes imagined that the place was a temporary camp of nomads put up for a few days; the transient, bustling camp had come up only that morning and would not be there when he came again the next morning. He would find only the open field of red soil before him.

The bench on which he sat daily was vacant. He wiped it clean and took his seat. When a burst of chilly wind hit him, he wrapped the shawl close around him. The rays of the sun were still gentle; gradually it would get real hot which one would not notice after downing a couple. The shop had bamboo screens around to prevent outsiders from looking in. Devnath signalled the shopkeeper sitting amid glasses, bottles and plastic jars inside the low, thatched house. A full bottle and a glass materialised before him in no time. Fired gram would come with the second bottle. He was an old and regular customer; the owner of the shop knew exactly what he needed when. The glass had not been washed properly; a few files buzzed around it. The jingling of the glasses and bottle chimed with the humming of the flies. These sounds echoed his first introduction to words and sounds in the first book of his childhood. *Ding dong goes the bell; tick tock goes the clock.*

There was no poetry now; only words. In his childhood, there was sheer poetry in the words of the primer, unrelated words which had

nothing to do with each other. "Round and round the eddy" was made to rhyme with "uncle's teddy." Or, "a group of lame men sitting in a circle," "talked to each other with a happy chuckle." The very idea of some special folks merrily busy gossiping created a poetic mood. He looked up at the sound of cawing overhead and his hand automatically covered his glass. The crow is gruff and uncouth, but it is also the harbinger of good news. The swan might be sent as a messenger like the cloud-messenger in Sanskrit poetry. But a crow-messenger? What kind of poetry could be written about the crow? The raven? Edgar Allan Poe? Not any more! Never!

Some other customers had arrived by this time. They would talk among themselves and never bothered him. Who knows what they made of him? Only once had someone come to him and asked, 'Sir, you write poetry, no?'

Devnath could not hear him right the first time; he looked questioningly at the man. The man came closer and said, 'Poetry; you write poetry, don't you?'

Devnath was a bit amazed but happy and nodded in the affirmative. The sobriquets of a poet got stuck when one had written poetry once; it didn't matter if he had not written for years thereafter. He himself didn't remember when he had written his last poem.

'I want to get a couplet written at the back of my truck', the man said with a natural ease.

Devnath recalled that he had received such customised requests to write wedding songs during his college days. There was a tradition at the time to print eulogies meant for the bride and the groom and distribute them among the guests. He wrote a few lines at times out of sheer exasperation and without making any real effort, but his friends later informed him that the songs were greatly appreciated. The truck driver said, 'But the couplet has to be real good; good enough to take on the Hindi ones.'

Someone had asked him to write after so many years. There was a time when he received repeated reminders from editors of magazines; singers didn't let him alone with their entreaties to write lyrics for

them. All this now seemed to have taken place in an earlier birth. The truck driver brought a bottle from the shop and placed it before him after he had agreed to his request. Advance payment for poetry on order! Devnath felt that he had taken on a heavy responsibility as he took a drink from the new bottle. Writing a cheap rhyming couplet seemed too tough for him now. He thought of a jingle in order to release himself from the obligation; no beginning, no end; no enemy, no friend. But he didn't like either its meaning or its language or the rhyme. Besides, every truck carried some such a message at its back!

For the next few days, he got busy in rearranging these two lines or trying to write a new couplet. The few words only got shuffled around as he kept at the job with all seriousness, but a good rhyme would not come. He hoped he would never meet that trucker again. The man sometimes came to the shop when Devnath was present there. Even though he never reminded him about it, Devnath could not forget the advance he had been given. Once when they came face to face, Devnath took out a small notebook and pen from his pocket and placed them on the table just to show that he had not forgotten his commitment. The man seated at a distant table looked at him and smiled, but did not make any further effort to communicate with him.

Devnath was scared that the man would some day confront him and demand his couplet for the bottle of booze. He tried to calculate how many bottles he could reasonably get in exchange for a whole poem. The man never turned up again. Even if he had not been able to complete the jingle, Devnath would look out for the man since he was his living testimony to being a poet. But the man never came again. How fast things changed in a few days! The thatched roof of the wine shop had given way to a pucca structure. The furniture was now of a better quality and more expensive. The man had perhaps left the state and gone elsewhere to start life afresh. It was also quite possible that some accident had taken his life.

Even this minor aberration in the unexciting life of Devnath was a thing of the past like his own childhood—the slow pace of childhood

and youth spent in the village. The memory of freedom fighters, tricolour in hand, parading down the village roads, was more fresh in his mind than his personal sorrows and happiness or the village festivities. 'Come under the flag if you believe in Gandhi, lose your identity in the waves of freedom'—there was perhaps no poetry in such songs, but there was great excitement. It had no music, but there was a strange elation in the group singing the patriotic lines. The poetry was a mere footnote to the flag. Then came *Inquilab Zindabad* —a one-page song about a boy martyr selling at two paise apiece, it was about a 12-year old laughingly braving bullets. Poetry was song; reading meant singing; getting at the meaning was not through reclusive reading, but through processions. Then came poetry's new age when a modern poet wrote his memorable lines about the martyr in a new idiom—'this is no funeral pyre, friends, this is the wick of freedom burning eternally in the country's darkness.' And later came Alfred J. Prufrock to pull him out of the golden enchantment of daffodils.

The convulsions that took place inside his chest while reading Eliot for the first time in college still sent shivers down the spine. At the time he sought out and read western poetry like a mad man. He had managed to find the meaning of the six lines of Dante in italics under the title 'Prufrock'. After class, he discussed poetry with his professor. He wanted to find out the meaning and context of the symbols, hints and indirect references in poems. It was as if he had to understand each line and each word of the poems he read. The professor advised him to steer clear of the difficult words and complex expressions which acted as hurdles and read the composition since only then would he enjoy reading poetry. But Devnath was not convinced. How could he segregate such parts from a poem? Those hurdles against which he stumbled were the real poetry for him: poetry that was meaningful in its own meaninglessness.

He stayed in his uncle's house in town to study in college. He had created his own world by piling together all his papers in the small

room he had been given to stay. He had no interest in games or movies like other boys; he sat for hours together when he chanced upon a book. All the libraries in the town were familiar to him and all his friends had a fondness for literature. Being a quiet, gentle and deferential young man, he mostly kept to himself and was loved by everyone at home in spite of it. No one ever upbraided him for spending all his time with books.

All the poems that he had written during his school days were in a bound notebook. He looked at poetry from a different angle when he came to town and read new poems and especially the English poets. When he read his poems from the old notebook, they seemed to be extremely dry, ordinary and hackneyed. Angrily, he tore the notebook into pieces and threw it away and started writing in a new notebook. He wrote a couple of lines, crossed them out and wrote something else. Sometimes he was able to write ten lines at a stretch and at other times he could not write even one line. But he never gave up; he persisted until the poem was complete. Then he started sending his poems to magazines. Finally, one day, one of his poems got published in a prominent literary journal.

Beyond poetry, he had little personal life. He knew that he had to find a job and set up his home once he finished college. And that came to pass too. He got a minor job in a small government office; he found a small house on a nondescript street and started his mediocre life. His wife was an amiable person and not very ambitious. His three-member family—yes, a son had been born to them in due time—managed quite well with his meagre salary. Devnath led a contented life within the narrow bounds. Contented because he had a greater world beyond his social life and temporal affairs—that of poetry. To be truthful, he roamed in an unending and all-encompassing universe beyond this world ever since he had become an ardent devotee of Tagore. Be that as it may, the poet had to return, at the end of the day, to his two-room house from that other world of his. He had to do the shopping, ensure the welfare of the children and cater to the social

demands of relatives and neighbours. These were matters which he would have preferred to ignore. These were matters which Rabindranath had jestfully described as the basis of the writing of the modern poet; the wine shop in neighbourhood, the altercations between husband and wife morning and evening, the empty capless bottle of oil, the comb with broken teeth, the last, thin slice of the cake of soap and so forth. Devnath believed that these subjects didn't make for poetry. Hence, he kept himself as much aloof from the household chores as possible. Luckily, his wife took complete charge of the household. In his own house, Devnath turned into a paying guest, and he was happy to hand over the salary to his wife on the first of each month.

He remained a paying guest for ever. He had arranged a cook for himself when he first started living in the village. But Devnath let Hari Master take care of him when he came as a tenant. He wound up his own kitchen and ate with Hari Master. He didn't take any money from him towards the rent, but when he offered some money to Hari Master, he refused outright.

But now, sitting under the gentle sun in the open space in front of the wine shop and sipping from his glass, he was not thinking of his family of yore. He was assailed more by lines of poems than the memories of his personal life. Tagore seemed to have had a complete hold over him at that time. Looking skyward he was searching for some curious star between the day's first sun and the last sun of the day, to whose question there was no answer. The mind turned euphoric when he thought of Gurudev. Everything seemed to be a cut above the commonplace—the sea of great humanity, the innermost heart which opened up the being, the man-child playing on the earth's shores!

Devnath had been disappointed when Gurudev wrote about the dog with wounds all over the body, dead mice, the fish in the pot of hot oil, dirty socks and disgusting flies. The same Vishwa Kavi, who once thought that there was nothing great about the fact of the train

running on steam, later wrote poems like 'Night Train' and 'Station'. But Devnath had got caught up in the cosmic phase of the poet. Deleting all the dry prose from life and poetry, he himself remained engrossed in unearthly things like love, time, death, immortality and relationships. He used up his life's sap in writing poetry.

He also got recognition and honours for that. He definitely enjoyed the glory of being a poet. He was held in high esteem in society even though he held a lowly job. The editors of magazines pampered him. He was invited to recite his poems. Writers and charmed readers were his friends. He lived according to the typical schedule of a poet as laid down by Sanskrit aestheticians: the poet should sleep for six hours, read for three hours in the morning after finishing his daily chores, write for three hours or revise what he had written the day before, participate in the criticism of his composition in the company of his friends in the afternoon and then revise them. In the process of living in this manner for a few years, two books of Devnath's poems were published. His poems found place in poetry anthologies and were translated into other languages. Side by side, his son became older, his wife became more sickly, more religious and more cantankerous; and Devnath became even more irresponsible with regard to his family.

He would move to the verandah when the sun was a bit more harsh. But it was all right at this time to sit here. More and more customers arrived as time rolled by. His was a known face in the place, and perhaps everyone knew that he was a literary man. Hence, he received some respect from everyone; no one occupied his usual seat. He picked up his glass and took a small sip. He drank slowly and in small measure since he spent a long time there. Everyone considered him irresponsible, but he was very careful about his drinking. Once he had fallen down on the road when he had taken more than his normal quota. Ordinarily, he took a rickshaw at such times, but he was unable to find a rickshaw that day. He was confined to the house for a long time after that. Hari Master was put into unnecessary trouble because

of him. He took him twice to the hospital in the nearby town, bought medicines for him and took care of his dietary needs.

Devnath was very careful from then onwards. He didn't have any right to put others to trouble. Notwithstanding the disturbances taking place in the world within him, he was determined to be careful in the world outside making sure that he remained in good health and paid others the consideration due to them. He could surely do this irrespective of how his mind wavered. But there was no way to rein in the mind. A couple of lines seemed to barge into his head at the time: 'beyond the earthly night, it kept shining bright.' At a more creative time in his life, he might have written a whole poem using these phrases. Arranging the two lines in different ways and adding more words in the beginning and end of the lines. He might have carried his thoughts towards a definite conclusion in a last line adorned with metaphors and complete in itself. A perfect poem flaunting its plentitude would have appeared before him on the piece of paper. Now he was left only with the pleasant memories of those highly fecund days.

Like someone told him one day that a renowned critic had written a piece praising his poems. Or that some author had used four lines from one of his poems as epigraph to his novel. It was even discussed that a writer had written a whole story based on his life. Devnath read the story. It was about a crazy poet. Devnath's friends perhaps considered him to be insane and that is why they found similarities between him and the poet in the story. Even though there was a similarity between his name and the name of the poet in the story. Devnath didn't find any other resemblance. His poems were totally different, the poet in the story was decadent and irresponsible while he himself was a sedate family man. But, despite so many dissimilarities, he sometimes felt that he had some affinity with Bhavnath, the protagonist of the story.

He recalled that it was Kusum who had taken a lot of trouble to locate the magazine where the story had been published. He was

always filled with love and affection when he thought of Kusum. When he thought of his wife, her face never got reflected in his mind, her name never came to his lips. But when he thought of Kusum, he felt like repeating her name again and again like a mantra: Kusum, Kusum, Kusum. Kusum's features floated up before him when he closed his eyes. He felt like comparing her features with every passing girl. Poetry came to mind when he thought of Kusum.

He had wanted to lead an easy and simple life, but this was not to be. A common belief is that the poet is a romantic animal who leads a wayward, Bohemian life and the society may not expect anything from him except some dreams set in rhyme. But Devnath himself didn't live in that kind of dream world. He lived like the common man, did his honest day's office work, was punctual and faithful to his wife. If he was not acceptable in society, it was because he spent all his leisure time reading and writing, without any socialising. He had deprived himself of games, movies, friends and entertainment. It could be said that he had withdrawn himself from society for the sake of poetry. Unfortunately, the same poetry, for which he had shunned everyone, left him one day, never to return again.

It was getting hot when a stray cloud floated in and it was no longer unpleasant in the open. Devnath tried to guess the time. He didn't wear a watch these days. How did it matter anyway to know the exact time? When others ordered food from the nearby dhaba and sat down to eat, he knew it was time for lunch. There would be food for him at home. Earlier, they worried if he didn't come back in time for lunch; now they knew that he would eat at the dhaba and return in the evening. His usual rickshawpuller came at such times to take him home if he did not have any other errands. He was not there today. Looking at the sky, he decided to stay on instead of going home. He was tired sitting in the same place since morning; he decided to move to the grass patch near the bamboo screen. He picked up his glass and went there. Rather than sit, he lay down comfortably on the grass.

This place seemed exactly like the patch of grass beside the bootlegger's shop behind the radio station where he had spent many a

pleasant time in the good old days. The big town of today was a cluster of small villages then. There was a lot of open space, scattered bushes and shrubs, and dilapidated structures. Country liquor was made at one such place and everyone would head for it once the day's work was over. There were no bottles and glasses; liquor was stored in large earthen pots and customers were ladled out the drinks in small earthen cups. They would carry a *kulhad* each and sitting on the patch of grass pass the day in idle gossip.

Devnath had never even thought in his dreams that he would ever drink liquor, or that he would give up writing poetry and write songs for films. He mulled over the past at times, but he was not sure if he could have avoided this metamorphosis. Song was poetry in the early phases of literature; the lyricist was the poet. Later came two distinct streams. Those who wrote songs only did not get the respect of a poet. Hence, he felt a bit insulted when a radio singer requested him to write a song for him. He had perhaps given a piece of his mind to the man at the time, for the singer had retorted, 'you call yourself a devotee of Rabindranath, don't you? What is Gitanjali if not a collection of songs?'

Devnath found himself in an awkward situation. Still he argued, 'Many of the poems of Gitanjali have not yet been set to tune and those poems would not have qualified for a place in Gitabitan.'

The singer went back that day, but when the most famous, successful and popular singer of the time asked him to write a song and said that he would set one of his poems to tune if he didn't write a special song for him, he could not refuse. Devnath wrote a customised song to his order keeping the length of the lines, the rhyming and the number of words as given by him. He had thought it to be his first and last song written to order. But, to his misfortune, the particular piece came out as an extraordinarily beautiful song set to lilting music by the music director and sung in the mellifluous voice of the singer. In a few days, the light love song had become very popular and could be heard everywhere.

It was a strange experience for Devnath. How many people read poetry? Or understood poems? Or even wanted to understand? But the song was on everyone's lips. The words might lose their meaning, but the tune remained etched in memory. When there were more requests for songs, Devnath gave up writing poetry and concentrated on writing songs. There was a different kind of excitement in writing songs. The words had to be coaxed out to a form in a poem; they had to be drilled into submission while writing a song. The message in poetry was camouflaged in many ways so that the reader would read it again and again and interpret it in his own way. The song was a direct conversation with the listener and would touch a chord in him with the first pronouncement. Poetry was dependent on words; in a song, music assisted the words or the words supported the music. Many a times, the music director hummed a tune for him and it was left to Devnath to write a song to fit the tune.

Poetry was written in solitude—one had to talk to oneself in solitude and have a dialogue with oneself to write poetry on a piece of paper. But the song was a collaborative effort: the lyricist, the singer and the music director joined hands to produce the finished product which finally reached the listener. Devnath, who had lived alone for a long time, had to now enter the greater family of music with its singers, music directors and musicians. The circle went on increasing beyond the radio to reach the record company and then finally the cinema.

Another problem that came along was the organisation of the time at his disposal. Earlier, he read and wrote in the morning, and left home when it was time to go to office. But the demands of music were of a different kind—sometimes they needed it immediately and at other times changes had to be made at short notice .He had to adjust his time according to others' convenience. But, gradually, Devnath stopped disliking the experience of moving around in the world of music. Most of the people in this world remained awake till late in the night and woke up late. Devnath had to join them quite often during

office hours. He, who had never neglected his duties until then, had to go out frequently during office hours those days. Memos were issued to him and finally, he was asked for explanations for dereliction of duty.

When he told his friends about this, one of them said, 'you better resign from that cheap job. You'll find you can earn much more from writing songs.' In fact, he had already started earning some money from his songs. As an approved lyricist, he received payment for all his songs that were broadcast. The record companies paid him well too. On hearing about his problems at office, another friend said, 'Why should you resign?' It's a government job; nothing will happen whether you work or not. They will issue letters to you; you could write back to them. And, in no time, it will be retirement time. Why should you lose your pension?'

Devnath liked the advice. Many of his colleagues in the office did no work but collected their salary at the end of the month. At least, he had never neglected his duties until then. Even if he left office, he made it a point to complete the work assigned to him. Of course, he could not do this for long. One of the main reasons for this was his taking to drinking.

The dictum that an artist leads a wayward, uncontrolled and irresponsible life was perhaps especially applicable to musicians. They had to show they were different not only in clothes, but also in their conduct—and one aspect of this was drinking. Of course, as a lyricist, Devnath didn't have to be present all the time in such a group, but he aligned himself with the group under the pretext that he might be needed any time. These people would move around in an unused corner of the radio station amid musical instruments and the like throughout the day and would walk down to a nearby teashop when they had a bit of time to relax. More often they would go to the booze shop which was not far-off. Devnath would accompany them there with his glass of tea in hand. One day, he finally tasted a bit of booze and spat it out.

After a few sips of the stuff in this manner over a number of weeks, he no longer found it unpalatable. And on discovering the heady effect it had on him Devnath became its devotee. He now recalled all this while lying on the grass. When he closed his eyes, it was no longer possible to differentiate between the past, the present and the future; everything got mixed up and became hazy. Devnath could not have imagined at one time that someone like him who was content to live within his limit, who was disciplined and conscious of the world around him would one day turn into a drunkard and an outcast; but this metamorphosis did take place, though extremely slowly.

The other change that took place was his demotion from a poet to lyricist in the eyes of his critics and readers. There are no readers for a lyricist; songs do not get published in any magazines or books and they only have listeners. Besides, since new songs came to the market in quick succession, an impression was created that while poetry was eternal, songs provided only temporary excitement and had a lifespan of only eight days. There was no logic in this, just as it is not right to conclude that popular literature is not good literature. The editors balked at publishing when Devnath sent songs instead of poems to magazines. There was no possibility of publishing a collection of lyrics. He conceded that he was no longer a poet; he was only a lyricist.

Despite this acceptance, what hurt him most was that he had no control over the subject of his writings. Movie-makers simply explained the scenes to him: hero sitting all by himself on a river bank after coming back from the cremation ground, heroine's plight after seeing off her lover at the railway station, or two girls teasing each other, and so on; he had to write songs for such situations. He wrote many such songs for the radio, record companies and movies, and some of them were so popular that he become more famous as a lyricist than he ever was as a poet.

But it was not possible to draw a line once one had compromised with principles. After he started writing songs instead of poetry, he

received requests to write dialogues for films. He wanted to refuse, but the producer said that the gentlemen entrusted with the job had suddenly disappeared, and he would incur a huge loss if Devnath did not come to his rescue. He also agreed to pay him well for this. Devnath agreed to it despite himself and he was happy to receive the money.

That was not the end of the matter. Producers now requested him to write songs with a double entendre. Of course, they did not say it in so many words, but said that the song should cater to the common people as also to the elite. A producer cited a song as an example which seemed alright on the surface, but a close look revealed indecent descriptions of the female anatomy and lewd description of sexual acts in every line. Devnath refused at first, but was persuaded to write a song which contained reference to physical love but was not vulgar. However, the producer altered his lines and the song that finally appeared in the film was highly obscene. The song, however, became a big hit and when cassettes carrying his name were sold, Devnath had no further reservations about writing such songs.

One of the memorable events of his movie days was to go to Kolkata for the first time for the shooting of a film for which he had written the lyrics. He had wanted to go to Kolkata for a long time to meet the poets and writers there and specially to visit Gurudev's house. But the producer was not inclined to take him along. Finally, he reached Kolkata without a ticket through a T.T.I. friend and stayed in a cheap hotel with another friend. When he reached Tollygunge the next day, he found the unit busy in their work and no one paid him any attention. He came out of the studio along with his friend and enquired from a young man the directions to different places. The young man didn't seem to know where Jorasanko was, but he said his name was Somen and he published a little magazine. He said he could show them around Kolkata. From his name, appearance, clothes and early-morning drunkenness it was clear that the man was a poet and the two of them decided to be his friends for the day. The place where

Somen took them, after changing buses twice was known as Khalasitola. In spite of the surrounding filth, this booze joint was much cleaner and prosperous compared to the booze shop near he radio station. And the drink too was less disagreeable.

After his second glass. Devnath forgot Rabindranath's house and concentrated on observing the other customers. Most of them were from the labour class, but four smartly dressed young men were seated around a table at a distance. He had heard that a few poets also frequented the joint. Were they the young foursome who ruled Kolkata after twelve in the night, as the poet said? There was no point in asking Somen for he was totally sozzled by then.

In the afternoon, Somen made them accompany him to the Kali temple. On reaching the place, they could figure out that the real haunt of Somen was the pandal around the tree in front of the temple, for everyone knew him there. Somen gave them the slip once he reached the place. The temple was closed at the time. Hence, instead of trying to find Somen, they started walking towards the address in Hartaka Lane which Somen had given them. This was Devnath's first acquaintance with a brothel and it did not turn out to be as unpleasant as he had thought. Both of them returned pretty late to the hotel and boarded the train for home the next day.

Devnath was apprehensive that he would fall sick, but he got over the feeling within a few days. On the other hand, he planned another visit to Kolkata whether the movie folks went there or not. This time he planned to keep his tryst with Jorasanko. All these days, he had forgotten the name of that girl of Harkata Lane. He remembered it all of a sudden today. It was Tilottama. The name of the girl in the radio station was Kusum. The name of his wife was Basanti. The name of his beloved was Poetry.

The changes that took place in his life were slow, but they were sure and inevitable. He was now extremely irregular in office. There was no definite time for him to return home. His food habits too became erratic. The money that he gave his wife to run the house

became irregular and there was no peace at home on this count. Finally, one day Basanti left for her father's home, bag and baggage and their 14-years old son. In his state of drunkenness, Devnath did not realise that his own life was getting destroyed bit by bit.

After that things moved at a fast pace. He was asked for explanations from his office which he didn't bother to reply to. Soon, he was suspended from his job. It proved a boon to him as there was no further need for him to go to office, while he got half his pay sitting at home or at the booze joint. Poetry had left him long since; he discovered that song writing was also about to desert him. He had now to put in a lot of effort to write a song of four lines, and what he finally wrote was not appreciated by anyone. Gradually, he became irritable and short-tempered, and started picking quarrels with people for no reason whatsoever.

Once he picked a fight with the clerk in charge of preparing bills at the radio station. It not only took a long time to receive payment for what was due to him for his lyrics, but he also had to appease a number of people in the accounts section for that. Earlier, he was not worried if payments were delayed, but now he insisted on getting paid immediately after submitting his bills. The clerk asserted that Devnath would not get any money as long as he didn't affix a revenue stamp on the bill and sign it. Earlier, they used to leave some stamps with the clerk so they would not have to look for stamps every time they submitted a bill. But the clerk asked him for a stamp that day and Devnath asked him for an account of the stamps given to him earlier. A row broke out. Kusum came and placed a stamp on the clerk's desk as they were about to come to blows. Instead of being grateful, Devnath vented his anger on Kusum and shouted at her. But the matter was put to rest at that point and the clerk paid his dues.

A few days later, Devnath went to Kusum. He begged her forgiveness for his earlier behaviour and thanked her for having helped him. When he invited her for a cup of tea, he thought Kusum would demur. But Kusum readily agreed. She came to the tea-shop

with him and sat beside him on the bench. Devnath was convinced that the girl liked his poems or songs, and had come to help him that day because of that. He presented a copy of his poetry collection that he had carried with him to her and asked, 'Have you read any of my poems?' Kusum shook her head in the negative.

'What about my songs?' Devnath asked.

Kusum again said no.

Then she opened the book and read a little bit, turned the pages over and moved her eyes over another poem. She closed the book and said, 'I feel like crying when I read these poems.'

No one had expressed such a sentiment after reading his poetry for there was nothing in his poetry that would make someone cry. Be that as it may, Devenath liked to talk to the girl. What an irony that he had to meet this young girl so late in life! Only if he had met her when he was younger! Devnath thought of all these things, but didn't try to meet the girl again. He reminded himself that some day he would write a poem for the girl, not for publication in a magazine or for anyone to sing, but only for her to read.

That too didn't happen. Finally, he wrote a poem about steel. The atmosphere was tense at the time with demands for setting up steel plants. The government at the Centre was from a different party, and meetings were held and procession taken out regularly against it. Some of his friends joined this movement enthusiastically and pursued him to write a protest poem or song. However much he tried, not a line came out from his pen at the time. They ultimately shut him up in the house of a friend who stayed alone and said, 'No poem, no booze.'

It was thus that his most famous poem was born. When in course of time steel plants came up in the state, Devnath thought that his poem on steel would lose its relevance. But something which had seen the light of the day through so much drama could not fade away so easily. Even though he had written many poems which were much better, people now knew him for the few slogan-mongering lines of

the poem. Whenever any new anthology of poetry came out, his steel poem found a place in it. Mercifully, no one had as yet conferred the title 'Poet of Steel' on him!

One day the head clerk of his office called him and said, 'The enquiry relating to your service is almost complete. As you are not replying to the charges framed against you, you will surely be dismissed from service now. You are entitled to pension for the number of years of service you have put in. In my opinion, you should resign from the job and take your pension.'

Devnath had worked with the head clerk for a long time and had performed his duties sincerely. The head clerk liked him and had helped him a number of times. But Devnath had severed his relationship with him after he began to live his new life. He was filled with a sense of gratitude on hearing the advice from him today. He didn't hesitate any further and wrote his resignation letter at once. And just as he had been released from him family obligations after his wife left, so he found a release from the bondage of his job.

Interviewers often asked him, 'Did you resign from your job to write poetry?' This was just a polite question for everyone knew that he had been sacked from the job as he didn't attend office; just as everyone knew that he was dead as a poet. There was no literary value of such interviews; there was perhaps only a desire to tell the readers an interesting story. Just as the men from some television channel had one day descended on his village in a jeep. Of course, one good thing was that they had brought with them a young lecturer of literature to interview him A crowd gathered around them when they got down from the vehicle. And Devnath suddenly came to be looked upon with added respect by the village folk. The producer, the cameraman and the sound recordist took over his house. When Devnath wanted to wear some proper clothes before facing the camera, they advised him against it; they said that the film would be a candid one—just the way things are.

Devnath had no interest in the film. But a few days earlier, a representative of a particular channel had presented him with three

bottles of India-made foreign liquor and coaxed him to agree to the interview. The young lecturer asked him a lot of question related to literature, like what he understood by beauty; what were the three promises of love that he had mentioned in one of his poems; would it not be better if the last line was deleted from one particular poem of his; and so on. Devnath didn't have answers to these questions, but they videographed him all the time as he kept stammering and mumbling meaninglessly. When they took him to the booze shop, Devnath understood that their intention was to film him in his natural state; the producer told him to sit on the bench and continue drinking while talking to the young lecturer, and forget the presence of the camera.

After drinking a glass and a half, Devnath indeed forgot that he was the victim of an intruding camera. The lecturer was a quiet man with a love for literature, and he had read all the poems by Devnath. He wanted Devnath to return to his active days and write more poems. He recited a few old poems of Devnath from memory and brought out many deep meanings from them. He said he wanted to call the documentary 'Long Live the Poet' and that he would end the film with the hope that Devnath would have a long life to serve Goddess Saraswati.

An intoxicated Devnath didn't have even an iota of interest left in the goings-on. He stopped talking to the lecturer and concentrated on his drinking. The producer told him that they would now film him falling from the bench to the ground. Devnath was enraged on hearing this and said that he would have nothing more to do with them. The producer reminded him of his contract; Devnath retorted in an even higher pitch. Some people gathered around them. The producer provoked him again and again. The camera was on all the time and Devnath understood that they wanted to film him in that agitated state. Hence, he sat down on the bench quietly. The television crew packed up and prepared to leave. The producer came and thanked Devnath smilingly and bade goodbye. The lecturer once again requested him to write poetry and while taking leave, raised his hand in a theatrical flourish to say, 'Long live poetry!'

They all talked to him about his poetry as if he did not exist beyond his writing; he was nothing if not a poet. Of all his acquaintances, only Kusum did not have any interest in poetry. Perhaps she was disinterested in literature. One morning Kusum came to his house all alone, after Basanti had left. The boy who cooked for Devnath was there. Without bothering Devnath, she made a survey of all the rooms and said, 'How can you live like this! Please move a bit and let me set things in order.' She then went to the kitchen and helped the boy in cooking. Devnath could not decide whether he should thank her or scold her. Ultimately, he lay on the bed quietly and read a book until Kusum left after organising the rooms and upbraiding the servant.

Kusum kept coming at intervals after that even though Devnath spoke little and showed no interest in her. Once when Devnath was sick, Kusum took leave from her office and stayed the whole day to look after him. Devnath bore these excesses, but when Kusum said in the evening that she would stay for the night, Devnath refused firmly. However, Kusum made sure before leaving that the servant boy stayed with Devnath at night

When he thought of the past, Devnath had no complaints about his life. Those days there was no office. Rice and pulses came from the village. It was not difficult to run a one-man household. The pension took care of his drinks and the household expenses. He also wrote a song or two at intervals, whether he liked it himself or not, and got paid. When he received requests to write songs, he didn't bother whether they were decent or not or where the song would be used. He also got offers to write dialogues for films. Devnath knew that there was still some spark in his pen for which people sought him, even though he was dead as a poet.

The first hitch in his easygoing life came when the landlord asked him to vacate the rented house. Devnath had been staying in the house ever since he had joined service and even though the rent had been hiked at intervals, it was still quite low. Rents of houses had

increased everywhere and it was not possible for Devnath to take another house. Besides, there was little possibility of an out-of-job, wayward drunkard finding a house on rent. For some time, he ignored the landlord saying that he was looking for a house and would vacate as soon as he got it. He didn't make any effort to search for another and the landlord mounted pressure on him. As luck would have it, Devnath's old father passed away in the village at this time, putting an end to his worries.

Devnath was the eldest son of his parents. His brothers and sisters respected him and had maintained an even closer relationship with him when he became famous as a poet and lyricist. They had also distanced themselves from him when Devnath went downhill. Their relationship had come down to a mere exchange of letter at intervals and invitations to family functions. Devnath didn't visit them nor did he attend any family function. They too seemed happy about it. After the death of their father, the brothers got together in the village and proposed that Devnath should return to the village to look after their house and land.

Kusum was yet another problem for Devnath. Even though he had never shown any love and affection towards her, she had somehow taken him under her wing. She was a nice girl who looked after him well, and Devnath's friends advised him seriously, not in jest, to marry the girl. Devnath laughed it off. How could he marry at his age and in his condition! Kusum had never broached the topic or even hinted at it. She seemed to be satisfied with showering her love on him and taking care of him without expecting anything in return. Devnath liked the girl, but had no other thoughts beyond that. When one day Kusum got married and left the town, Devnath remained sad for a few days. Then he told himself, 'It's all for the good. Be happy, Kusum.'

Devnath felt even lighter in heart once he took the decision to return to the village. His life had been spent in town since his school days. But only a small faction of his life had been involved with the

town. His life in the city was limited to staying in a particular area and spending time with a limited number of friends. Now he would move to the open environs of the village. When he thought of the village, he formed a picture of an easy, simple, beautiful, idyllic life. Poetry's village. The village portrayed by Sachi Routray in his poem on his small village and by Jibanananda Das in *Rupasi Bangla*.

But when he reached there he found it was far from his imagined village. In the summer, the village looked extremely harsh and unattractive; it became muddy and dirty during the rains. People talked to him only about money and landed property. He had to give a detailed account to everyone on how much he earned, how much he harvested from his land and who would own his house after his death. Because of that, he gradually severed his relationship with the people in the village. His world became even more confined to the family of Hari Master and the liquor shop. His only contact with the outside world was the bank where he went to collect his pension and to drop an occasional letter in the post.

The village folk kept nagging him as to when the documentary on him would be telecast. Devnath didn't have an answer. One day, he received a letter from the lecturer: Dear Poet, I am pained to inform you that the documentary on you with which I was associated has met an untimely death. My question and answer session with you has been completely deleted from the film they have made. It's also a matter of regret that instead of showing it under the literary magazine section they plan to show it under a programme called 'social evil.' Hence, I have decided not to cooperate with the producer of the film. I think you too should also totally dissociate yourself from them. But you must continue writing, and I pray that Goddess Saraswati would continue to shower her blessings on you. 'Long live poetry!'

Devnath read that letter as disinterestedly as he had read Kusum's letter received a long time back. There was no point any more in furthering any relationship, or any activity in life. He must only think of spending the rest of his life without physical,

psychological and financial problems. The rest of the time could be easily spent in the small world of his house, Hari Master and the liquor shop. This was a life outside the society; but so had been his life as a poet.

The sun had gone down. The winter evening was fast spreading on to the grass. He had forgotten to take his lunch today. They must have waited for him for some time in Hari Master's house and given him up. They were extremely nice people. The villagers including his own brothers had tried to poison his mind against Hari Master. 'Hari Master,' they said, 'had an eye on his property.' Devnath listened to them but remained quiet. Why should he try to explain to anyone that the love he received from Hari Master and his family would keep him indebted to them for ever? Let them think what they like; let them say what they want. He had wanted the reclusive life of a poet and he had got it. He had given up on everything else consciously.

Kusum had written: I am writing my first letter to you as your memory has been bothering me a lot today. My son is growing up and my family life is fine. But I think of you often. And, would you believe, if ever you ask me to come to you, I will leave everything that very moment and come running back to you.

Devnath stood up to go home. He could see his friendly rickshaw beyond the boundary of the shop. He would return home now. He no longer had with him any song or poem or words or tunes. They had all been left behind. But the special world of poetry that he had once created for himself was left with him. And he knew that he would be able to spend the rest of his life happily within that limited world.

Translation: Ashok Mohanty

12

Death of a Raja

(Excerpt from the novel *A Time Elsewhere*)

Puri, December 1859

Jackals suddenly began howling in chorus, as if they were determined to take over the town of Puri. Their howling and the chilly morning breeze roused Birakeshari from sleep. He had dozed off in the small hours of the morning after tossing and turning all night in a fever. Lying in bed, he fixed his eyes on the lamp that burned feebly; it appeared even feebler against the first light of the day. In the darkness of the night the lamp had seemed intimately bound up with his life; as if life would come to an end when the lamp petered out. But his chief queen, Suryamani, had stayed up all night and not only kept him alive; she had also kept the lamp burning. She now lay fast asleep in a chair beside his sickbed.

Throughout the night, fear and anxieties had oppressed him. But now Birakeshari's mind was calm and untroubled. He took solace from the thought that not only was he the raja of Khurda or Puri, by the grace of Lord Jagannath, he was raja of all of Orissa. He began silently to repeat his royal title, which had taken him long to commit to memory: Illustrious Hero, Lord of Elephants, Sovereign of Bengal, Supreme Monarch of Utkal-Karnata-Nine forts, Terrible as Bhairav, Protector of the Pious, Master of Warriors, Mighty Lord with a

Thousand Arms in Battle, Comet of the Kshatriya Race, the Great Emperor Sri Sri Sri Birakeshari Dev. But rehearsing the title failed to bring him any solace. What possible relief could one, who had been king for only four years and was dying at the age of twenty-five, expect?

The thoughts which had filled his mind through the night came crowding back. His childhood had been dominated by fear and illness. Although he had wanted to study, his poor health did not permit him to go very far. And he had been subjected to harsh discipline by his father, Ramachandra Dev. Ramachandra had died four years earlier but it seemed as if he still kept a close watch over Birakeshari's every action. His father had never allowed Birakeshari to step out of the palace; his entire life was spent within its four walls, among the people who lived there and the people who visited it. Birakeshari stepped out on to the streets of Puri for the fist time when he accompanied his father's bier. It remained for him a memorable occasion.

Birakeshari recalled his father with some anger mingled with a little fear. Ramachandra Dev had ascended the throne at the age of fourteen and had remained king for nearly forty years. He was a deeply religious man and intensely devoted to Lord Jagannath. In the morning, he would not touch even water before the first offerings were made to Lord Jagannath at the temple. The bitterness which Birakeshari felt towards his father spilled over into his attitude towards Lord Jagannath. Although he went through all the rituals and observed all the rules, Birakeshari never felt really close to the god. All night, every time he tried to think of the deity, Birakeshari succeeded only in remembering his father. It was as if Ramachandra stood between him and Lord Jagannath, and this was yet another of Birakeshari's many grievances against his father. Whenever he thought about his father, the solid, well built figure of Ramachandra would appear before him, and Birakeshari would remember the many occasions when his father had tried to discipline him.

When Birakeshari was a child, Ramachandra would take him to a heap of stones lying near the palace wall and show him the stone sculptures. These had been brought there from the temple at Konark and Ramachandra planned to use them to repair the temple of Lord Jagannath. So profound was his devotion to Lord Jagannath that he did not hesitate to pull portions of the Konark temple down in order to repair the Jagannath temple. After getting permission from the district magistrate of Puri, he set about dismantling the Konark temple and bringing sculptures and stones over to Puri with such zeal and vigour that the Asiatic Society had to intervene and get the magistrate to withdraw permission.

By this time, however, Ramachandra Dev's men had brought quite a few sculptures from the Konark temple to Puri. Ramachandra would point to these and tell Birakeshari, 'If Commissioner Ricketts had not stopped me, I would have brought half of the stones of Konark temple to Puri.' One wish of his, however, remained unfulfilled. When the figures were thrown down from a height, many of them were damaged. But Ramachandra had instructed his men to ensure that the Navagraha slab of stone with the images of the nine planetary gods carved on it remained absolutely intact. The masons had lowered the slab with immense care. Ramachandra had wanted to install the planetary gods in the Puri temple premises. But in this he had not been successful, and he always told this to Birakeshari with some regret.

Ramachandra also used to tell Birakeshari of his many grievances against the sahibs. They had always harassed and levied fines on him whenever things went wrong in the temple. A few years ago, an accident inside the temple had claimed the lives of some pilgrims. Birakeshari recalled that this incident made life very difficult for Ramachandra for a long time. The sahibs made life no less difficult for Birakeshari himself after he became the king. From time to time, various orders were issued to him by the district magistrate of Puri, Mr. Mactier. If he ever protested, the magistrate would simply not

listen and if he protested too much, the magistrate would tell him that the order came from Cuttack from the commissioner, Cockburn. It was as if Cockburn were god almighty, against whom there existed no court of appeal.

Once, a document had come to Birakeshari for his signature. This said that the government would discontinue the money grant to the temple and offered him some land in Khurda in lieu of it. His attorneys advised Birakeshari against putting his signature to such a document, for doing so would amount to admitting that all the lands in Khurda belonged to the government, not to the raja. When Birakeshari refused to sign the document, the magistrate sent word that the money grant for the temple would be stopped from October 1, 1858, and that Birakeshari would also be removed from the post of superintendent of the temple. But when Birakeshari still refused to sign the document, Cockburn, now terribly annoyed, wrote to the magistrate of Puri to bring the raja to the collectorate and force him to add his signature. In the end, Birakeshari signed the document against his will. From that day onward he held Cockburn in awe. Even though he had never set eyes on Cockburn, the very thought of him brought back memories of Ramachandra to Birakeshari.

Birakeshari now turned to look at Suryamani as if he wanted respite from these unpleasant reflections. A deep sadness came over him at the sight of Suryamani lying fast asleep. All his life he had been in poor health; he had given her no happiness at all. The grief of being childless always occupied his thoughts. Suryamani was quiet, innocent, simple and free of guile. How would she cope with such vast responsibilities all by herself after his death? Had his uncle, Padmanabh Ray, been a good man, Birakeshari could have entrusted Suryamani to his care and stopped worrying. But Padmanabh was a wicked, villainous man, always involved in some intrigue or the other. Ramachandra had been completely dependent on him. Padmanabh was in charge of managing the raja's landed property and he was creating a lot of trouble. His conduct as superintendent of the

Satyabadi temple and his management of its funds were not above board. Moreover, he had such an unholy influence on Ramachandra that Suryamani could not bear even to look at him.

Since he had no issue of his own, Birakeshari had decided to adopt the prince of Khemandi. Although some other kings had sent in proposals offering their sons for adoption, Birakeshari had made up his mind to adopt the second son of the king of Khemandi, for the reports he had received about this royal family were extremely favourable. The raja of Khemandi had come to Puri with his four-year-old son a few days earlier and was staying in a rented house by the seashore. Whenever Birakeshari spoke of organizing the ceremony of adoption, Suryamani would change the subject, for, though unexpressed, she was convinced that this ceremony was somehow tied up with Birakeshari's life. So the ceremony was delayed and the raja of Khemandi kept waiting in Puri. As far as possible, the whole matter was kept a close secret for fear that Padmanabh might create mischief if he got wind of it.

Suddenly, Birakeshari was racked by a fit of coughing, and Suryamani woke up. She felt his forehead and found that there was no temperature and his face was looking fresher. Birakeshari said to her, 'Make arrangements for the ceremony today.' Suryamani was going to demur, but the look in Birakeshari's eyes dissuaded her. She now realized she could no longer put the ceremony off. Knowing that the raja was awake, the maidservant, Nanima, entered the room and informed Suryamani that the rajguru, the palace priest, had arrived. It was one of his chief tasks to perform the worship of the deities in the palace every morning. When Birakeshari was taken ill, a salagram had been brought over from the Jagannath temple and installed in a room adjoining his bedchamber. Birakeshari was carried there every day and worship was offered. At the end of today's worship, when Birakeshari was brought back to his room and laid on the bed, he seemed more worn out than ever before. Even in this condition, he told the court priest about the adoption ceremony and gave Suryamani instructions to send for Dewan Mahadev Lal.

Since Queen Suryamani now spent nearly all her time in the raja's bedchamber, male servants of the royal household were forbidden access to the room. If someone was to be called over, Nanima would be informed and then she would send for him through one of the palace servants. Because of this arrangement, the servants of the palace had become powerful—they were the only links between the palace and the outside world. Presently, Mahadev Lal arrived. Ever since Birakeshari had taken to his bed, Mahadev Lal had come to the palace nearly every morning and stayed on until late into the night. After the queen left the room, he came in and stood beside Birakeshari's bed. Birakeshari could speak only with great difficulty. He said to Mahadev, 'We will hold the ceremony this very day. Make arrangements. And request the magistrate to come to me. I want to talk to him about the adoption.'

It was a Sunday morning. The magistrate of Puri, J. B. Mactier, was smoking a cigar after breakfast, sitting on the verandah of his bungalow by the sea. Seated at his feet, a sepoy was busy cleaning a gun. At one end of the verandah, Seristadar Purushottam Patanayak, his record keeper, sat cross-legged beside a heap of files. There was a palanquin outside and its bearers sat near it, waiting. At this time, another palanquin arrived and Mahadev Lal emerged. When Mactier saw him, he looked up at the wall clock and knew his departure for his tour would be delayed.

From the day he had taken up post in Puri, Mactier had always felt it would have been better if he had been posted in Cuttack. Cuttack was an important station for the sahibs. And in Puri there was always some problem or the other relating to the temple and the raja. True, the raja had been granted a monthly pension of two thousand rupees, and landed property had been specially allotted to the temple for meeting with its expenses. But there was no end to troubles, big or small. The temple priests were a constant source of nuisance; they were always harassing the pilgrims. On occasion, even terrible mishaps had occurred. In 1853, during the Swing Festival,

some pilgrims died in a stampede on account of the irresponsibility of these temple priests. Then, the temple priests, the head constables and the police officer who had been in charge of the festival had been fined and jailed. A warning had also been issued to the raja, Ramachandra Dev. On another occasion, Ramachandra had prevented a king from Ganjam from offering worship at the temple for three months to extort money from him. For this offence, he was made to pay a fine of one hundred rupees.

Natives could not meet the sahibs whenever they wanted, but Mahadev Lal enjoyed some privilege in this matter. Many sahibs knew that he was a relation of Deputy Collector Ram Prasad Ray. When Mactier sahib was supervising settlement work at Kujang, Ram Prasad had assisted him, and Mahadev had an opportunity of making his acquaintance. After Mactier came to Puri, Mahadev called upon him from time to time to express his dismay at the king's mismanagement of his affairs. Now Mahadev took off his shoes and went up to the veranda. He saluted the magistrate and informed him that the raja's condition was critical and that he wanted to see the magistrate.

This was nothing unusual. That the raja was suffering from a terminal illness was known to all. Now and then word was sent by the inspector of police, Puri, that the raja was about to die; but he had rallied every time. Mactier said, 'But this is no news.' Mahadev answered, 'No sir, it seems he will not be able to leave his sickbed this time.'

Had he been in a different mood he would have told Mahadev that he had no time. But yesterday's mail had brought him not one but two letters from his dear wife. The letters were sweet and loving. That morning Mactier had read them a second time and this had put him in very good spirits. He said, 'You go on ahead. I will follow you on horseback.' As he descended the stairs and made his way towards the syce who was waiting with his horse, he told Mahadev, 'Take Dr Kendall with you on your way back.'

When he entered Birakeshari's bedchamber he could see that the raja's condition was indeed very serious. Birakeshari lay listlessly on his bed and did not open his eyes after Mactier entered the room. Only the sound of his breathing, which was barely audible, indicated that he was still alive. A servant tried to rouse Birakeshari but Mactier asked him not to and took a chair by the sickbed. A little while later, Mahadev Lal and the civil surgeon, Dr Kendall arrived. Kendall went straight up to Birakeshari, removed the blanket and felt his chest and pulse. Replacing the blanket, he looked across at the magistrate and shook his head to indicate that there was no hope.

At this moment Birakeshari opened his eyes. Mactier got up from the chair and went close to him. Recognizing him, Birakeshari made an effort to rise but Mactier put a hand on Birakeshari's shoulder and asked him not to. Mactier said, 'Everything is all right. You will get well,' Birakeshari said something in reply but the sound of his breathing rendered the words so indistinct, they became unintelligible. He made another attempt to speak. Mactier put his ear to his lips but still could not make sense of what he said. Mahadev explained, 'The king is saying that he will adopt the king of Khemandi's son as his heir.'

These words made Mactier suddenly grow cautious. In his career as a civil servant he had learnt a very important lesson: nothing natives do is ever simple or straightforward. What a native says, what he does and what his real intention is, are always an impenetrable mystery. What Mahadev Lal said made him think of Act 10 of the year 1840. Since there was always some complication involving the king and the temple, the magistrate had to have recourse to this Act and Mactier had committed it to memory. The Act made no provision for adopting an heir. Since he now found himself in an awkward situation, Mactier said, 'You send in an application on this subject; we'll see.'

Suryamani came into the room as soon as the magistrate and the others left. Birakeshari had again dropped off to sleep. Suryamani

knew what she had to do now. She sat down in a chair by his bed and laid her hand on his as if she expected support for all her actions from this man lying before her like a lifeless object. She called Nanima over and said, 'Send word to Sibadas Babaji that he should come immediately. And tell the dewan and the court pandit to make arrangements for the adoption ceremony.'

There was, however, no need to send someone over to the rajguru for he had been waiting in the adjoining room for a long time. He was not at all happy about holding the ceremony in such a hurry. Before the heir was adopted, the court priest should have taken a Brahmin to Khemandi and performed the rite of welcoming. After this, the raja of Khemandi could have brought his son to Puri. Now all these rituals would have to be observed in Puri in the house rented by the raja of Khemandi.

Mahadev Lal had a lot of things to do. Legal documents would have to be prepared for the adoption; merely holding a ceremony would not be enough. He promptly set to work. He got an attorney to write out the adoption document, which was then signed by Birakeshari. Since he could not write properly, his thumb impression was also taken. In addition to this document, a will was prepared which stipulated that Suryamani would inherit all his immovable and movable property and remain responsible for the management of the temple. The will also included a clause stipulating that in the event of the death of the prince of Khemandi, Suryamani could adopt another son. A platform for the ceremony was constructed and other necessary arrangements made. Invitations were sent out to the mahants of the mutts and other personages in the town. A feast for Brahmins was also arranged. While doing all this Mahadev had to make sure that Padmanabh Ray was kept absolutely in the dark about the ceremony.

By evening, everything had gone off without a hitch. Although Birakeshari was required to be present when oblations were offered to the holy fire, it was decided that he should not be disturbed in view of

his serious condition. He was brought in only at the time of havan, when the offerings were made, and he took part in the rites of oath-taking, receiving and giving, and the pledging. Birakeshari and Khemandi's son, whom everyone now called Jenamani, the young prince, together made an offering of flowers. After this, Birakeshari was taken back to his bed.

It was about 9 p.m. when the holy man, Sibadas, arrived at the place. Thoroughly worn out by the stressful events of the day. Birakeshari had fallen into a deep sleep. Suryamani stayed near him, like a shadow. She stood up when Sibadas came in. She felt no reservations about speaking to Sibadas because he was a holy man. He was famous for his nostrums and was often asked to come to the palace. Today, he went straight up to Birakeshari and felt his pulse, chanted some mantras with his eyes closed and said to Suryamani, 'Let the king have his last glimpse of Lord Jagannath.' He then advised against any more medicines and left.

Taking the raja to the temple was no simple matter, for it involved several precise rules and procedures. First, it had to be cleared of people. After everyone was informed about the raja's visit, Birakeshari and Suryamani set out for the temple in two separate palanquins accompanied by umbrellas, gongs and trumpets. Temple officials, Mudiratba and Paricha, stood waiting at the Lion Gate to receive them. While the queen's palanquin was carried up to the Kalpabata, Birakeshari was borne on a litter from the Lion Gate. After the chief priest called out 'O Lord,' as was the ritual to be observed on such an occasion, worship was offered to the deity. However, Birakeshari was in no state to go through the last part of his visit to the temple, which required him to walk around the jewelled throne.

The news of the raja's visit to the temple had by now spread to some parts of the town. It was a winter night; the roads were deserted and most people had gone to bed. However, on the verandas of a few houses along the route which the king was to take on his way back, water-filled pitchers had been set and lamps had been lit. Of all this, of

course, Birakeshari was totally unaware, for he lay unconscious in the palanquin.

Back in the palace, he was made to lie down on the bed and when he opened his eyes, he saw Suryamani and tried to say something. But the words stuck in his throat. When Suryamani brought her face closer to his, he said with great difficulty, 'I leave the young prince in your care. Never chastise him!' Suryamani was suddenly reminded of something; she left Birakeshari's side and ran into the next room. Sibadas had given her some holy water from the river Ganga. But by the time she returned with it, Birakeshari had passed away.

When the wailing began, Mahadev Lal, who was waiting outside, decided his next course of action. He got a torch lit and made straight for the magistrate's bungalow in a palanquin. He must first be told of the raja's death. But this could not be done, for Mahadev was told at the gate that the magistrate had already left on a tour of Fatepur after returning from the palace.

Translation: Jatindra K. Nayak

Plays

I

Made for Each Other
(One-act Play)

Scene I

(A small sitting room, Professor *and* Mrs Sharma *seem to be waiting for someone. The* Professor *is reading a magazine and his wife is busy knitting. Both are silent and* Devdutt *is pacing the room impatiently. He goes to the chair in front of his parents and tries to attract their attention. But the* Professor *continues to read and his wife keeps knitting.*

Finally Devdutt *takes courage to speak up.)*

Devdutt: I repeat I do not believe in this arrangement.

(*The* Professor *and his wife look at* Devdutt *disapprovingly.*)

Prof. Count up to fifteen, again.

(Devdutt *counts one to fifteen. The* Professor *returns to his magazine and* Mrs Sharma *to her knitting.* Devdutt *starts pacing the room again. A car stops outside. The* Professor *looks at his watch.*)

Prof: I think the Judge Sahib has arrived. Go and find out, Devdutt.

*(*Devdutt *goes out and returns.*)

Devdutt: No, he has not come (*in the same breath*) and I do not believe in this arrangement.

Prof: But I do.

Mrs Sharma: And I do too.

Prof: What objection can there be to this arrangement? It is after all your marriage, and I want you to see the girl and approve of her. That is why I requested Judge Sahib to come here with his daughter. See her, talk to her, and if you agree, who are we to object?

Mrs. Sharma: That's right. Who are we?

(*Another car stops. The* Professor *looks at* Devdutt, *who goes out and soon returns.*)

Prof: (*sternly*) Devdutt...

(Devdutt *starts counting one to fifteen.*)

Prof: (*looks at his watch*) It's five now and the Judge Sahib should be here any minute.

(Judge Sahib *enters followed by his daughter.*)

Judge: Look, I arrived exactly at five, for I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(*The* Professor *and his wife greet them and request them to be seated.* Judge Sahib *keeps standing.*)

Judge: No, I cannot stay on now. I have an appointment with the Chief Justice at five minutes past five and I am a firm believer in punctuality. Let my daughter remain. The car will pick her up. And tomorrow, Devdutt, come and have dinner with us. At eight. On the dot.

(Judge Sahib *goes out repeating to himself that he is a firm believer in punctuality. Now they all look at the girl. She is still standing in a corner and gazing at them foolishly*).

Prof: Sit down, young girl.

Mrs Sharma: Please sit down.

(She apparently does not hear them.)

Girl: Did you say something?

Prof: (*in a loud voice*) Please sit down.
Mrs Sharma: (*louder still*) Sit down.

(*She hear them this time and goes towards the sofa, but stumbles against a centre table. She manages to sit down.*)

Prof: Sit down. Devdutt. (*To the girl*) This is our son Devdutt.

(*The girl does not hear him.*)

Mrs Sharma: (*loudly*) This is our son Devdutt.

(*She hears her and instead of greeting* Devdutt, *greets the* Professor.)

Prof: Devdutt is sitting that side. (*Loudly*) What is your name?
Girl: Tibha.
Prof: Tibha? That's a strange name.

(*The girl gets up and looks for something on the floor. Everyone looks at her in surprise.*)

Girl: My glasses. I think they fell off when I stumbled. Please help me find them.

(*The* Professor *and his wife begin searching for her spectacles.*)

Prof: I cannot find any glasses here.
Mrs Sharma: There are no glasses here.
Devdutt: That is because she was not wearing any glasses when she arrived.
Prof: Now that you mention it, that is true.
Mrs Sharma: Yes, that is right.
Prof: Don't worry. You have perhaps left your glasses at home. What are you studying?

(*The girl does not respond and so the* Professor *repeats the question in an emphatic tone.*)

Girl: (*almost shouts back*) In the first year. For the last two years. But what about my glasses? Are you sure I did not have them when I came?

Prof: No, you did not.

(*No one speaks for some time.*)

Prof: Which college do you study in?

Girl: Yes, in the first year. For the last two years. (*Suddenly*) Ah...

Prof: No, you did not have the glasses when you came.

Mrs Sharma: You did not have glasses.

Girl: No, not glasses. It has started.

Prof: What has started?

Girl: The pain in my left leg. (*She begins moaning.*) Let me go home now.

Prof: (*irritated now*) All right, go home.

Girl: But are you sure I did not drop my glasses here?

Prof: No, no.

Girl: Let me go then.

(*She walks out trying to find her way through the furniture.*)

Prof: The Judge Sahib was saying that his daughter was a brilliant student.

Mrs Sharma: And sings well.

Prof: But I find she is blind.

Mrs Sharma: And stone deaf.

Devdutt: But not dumb.

Mrs Sharma: (*ignoring him*) She has rheumatism.

Prof: She is an idiot. Her IQ is zero.

Mrs Sharma: She has a funny name.

Prof: I do not approve of the girl.

Mrs Sharma: I do not approve at all.

Devdutt: But I approve of her. And I am going to have dinner with the Judge tomorrow.

Prof: I do not believe in this arrangement.

Mrs Sharma: Neither do I.

Devdutt: But I do.

(Devdutt *goes out leaving his parents flabbergasted.*)

Scene II

(Judge Sahib's *dining room. The girl sits alone at the table looking at her watch. She says eight o'clock and* Judge Sahib *enters the room.*)

Judge: Where is Devdutt, Pratibha? It is already eight and I do not approve of unpunctuality.

(*A bearer gives the* Judge Sahib *a piece of paper, which he passes on to* Pratibha.)

Pratibha: (*reads*) Devdutt thanks the honourable judge for his gracious invitation to dinner.

(Devdutt *enters. He carries a swagger stick. He is drunk.*)

Devdutt: And is pleased to accept the same.

(*He bows to them with a flourish.* Judge Sahib *and his daughter stand to receive him and look at him not knowing what to do.*)

Devdutt: Hello Judge Sahib. How do you do? Pleased to meet you (*To the girl*) And you, dear. How do you do?

(*He extends his hand, but the girl ignores him.* Devdutt *removes his jacket, drapes it across a chair and sits down comfortably.*)

Devdutt: Why are you standing? Do sit down. Be comfortably. I am extremely grateful that you accepted my invitation. Extremely grateful. Please be seated.

(*When they do not sit down,* Devdutt *picks up the stick and brandishes it at them. They sit down.*)

Devdutt: (*laughs*) That's better. And what would you like to have? A whisky or a gin? Or a spot of champagne for you, mademoiselle? No? Then what will you have? A glass of water? Aqua pura? Boy, three glasses of water, please. The Judge Sahib believes in prohibition.

(*He laughs again.*)

Judge: I was going to tell you...

Devdutt: I know. You want to have a drink on the quiet. Boy—

(*The bearer arrives.*)

Devdutt: Show me the washroom, please.

(Devdutt *follows the bearer inside.*)

Judge: This man has no sense of time. He is mad.

Pratibha: He is a drunkard.

Judge: Delirium tremens. I know a man just by looking at him once and write my judgement the moment I see the accused in the dock. I know for certain that this man is due for the gallows.

Pratibha: He is dangerous.

Judge: But then I am getting late for dinner and I am a firm believer in punctuality. Boy, please, serve dinner in my bedroom.

Pratibha: Mine, too. And when that man arrives, tell him that we have gone to bed.

(Devdutt *enters and brandishes his stick.*)

Devdutt: Sit down. You see, I lost my way coming out of the bathroom.

(*They all sit down.* Devdutt *passes the glasses of water to them, and says "Cheers" and starts drinking. When they do not drink,* Devdutt *lifts his glass and they pretend to drink.* Devdutt *suddenly looks at his watch.*)

Devdutt: All right, you can go now. It is now time for me to go to bed. Exactly at thirteen minutes past eight. And I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(*He shakes hands with* Judge Sahib. *They turn to leave the room.*)

Devdutt: Shouldn't you be thanking me for the dinner?

Judge: Oh, yes. Thank you very much.

Devdutt: (*with humility*) You're welcome. It was nice of you to come. It was my pleasure. Good night. (*Looks at his watch.*) Oh my God! Eight fifteen already! I should have gone to bed now.

(Devdutt *puts his head on the dining table and falls asleep.* Judge Sahib *goes inside.* Pratibha *picks up the stick and hits* Devdutt.)

Pratibha: Hey, mister.

(Devdutt *rise with a start.*)

Devdutt: No, I do not have glasses.

Pratibha: Thank you, I do not use glasses. My eyesight is reasonably good.

Devdutt: But not your hearing.

Pratibha: I am not deaf either.

Devdutt: Rheumatic?

Pratibha: Not even that.

Devdutt: But then you are an idiot. Your IQ is zero.

Pratibha: No.

Devdutt: But then?

Pratibha: I was acting, for I do not want to spoil my successful student career by marrying. And I did not want to displease my father either.

Devdutt: Good for you. You may go now. I am going to sleep now. Good night.

(Devdutt *puts his head on the table to sleep.* Pratibha *hits him with the stick, this time a little harder.* Devdutt *gets up.*)

Pratibha: Put on your jacket and get out quietly, you drunken fellow.

(Devdutt *straightens his tie and puts on his coat.*)

Devdutt: No, I am not a drunk.

Pratibha: Then you must be mad. A criminal heading for the gallows.

Devdutt: No chance.

Pratibha: Delirium tremens?

Devdutt: No.

Pratibha: So—

Devdutt: I have decided to marry another girl. And so I was acting so that the Judge Sahib would himself disapprove.

Pratibha: (*returns the stick to* Devdutt) That is strange!

Devdutt: No, no. There is nothing strange. You count up to fifteen and you will find everything is all right. Oh, my God. I have to meet her and I am a firm believer in punctuality.

(Devdutt *hands over the stick to* Pratibha *and rushes out.* Pratibha *looks at the stick wonderingly and begins counting—one, two, three, four...*)

Translation: The Playwright

2

Sundardas
(Excerpt)

Act One

(*The ashram of* Sundardas, *a sadhu. A raised mud platform around a shady tree where people like to congregate. Morning.* Sundardas's *disciples,* Gangadhar Sarangi, Ramachandra Jachak *and his wife* Laxmi, Krupasindhu Sahu's *wife* Devika *and some other women;* Kamali, *her mother* Daani *and* Marua. *Also two Brahmins from a nearly village, and* Balabhadra, *who narrowly escaped being made a meria* (*human sacrifice*) *by the hill people. All are waiting for* Sundardas *to come out of his hut,* Gangadhar *is busy writing something on a palm-leaf with a stylus, and* Balabhadra *is trying to carry on a conversation with him.*)

Scene I

Gangadhar: Be quiet, will you, Balabhadra, my boy? Don't talk to me till I've finished writing. After that I'll be happy to listen to you for as long as you wish.

Balabhadra: Carry on with your writing. I'd better be off.

Gangadhar: (*Closes the palm-leaf scroll.*) Off where—back to the hills? Are you hoping to get caught by the tribesmen again and be sacrificed?

Balabhadra: That wouldn't be so bad. Right up to the end you live a life of luxury. Nothing's denied you—delicacies of every kind,

freedom to do whatever you want. You can walk into anyone's house, no doors are closed to you. But here, all the time it's do this, do that! From morning to night! So many rules: Bathe twice a day, don't eat fish or meat, don't chew tobacco, don't smoke. A thousand dos and don'ts.

Gangadhar: Listen Balabhadra, this is an ashram and not some godforsaken hell-hole in the remote hills.

(Brahmin I, *one of the two Brahmins who have been listening to the conversation, inches closer.*)

Brahmin I: Just what sort of an ashram is this? There aren't any idols; there's no worship, no priests!

Gangadhar: Not a typical one, certainly. The caste system isn't enforced. Baba says there are no castes, that all men are qual. Here you'll find Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras mingling freely and praying together.

Brahmin I: Oh go ahead and pray. By all means, pray. But where's the temple?

Gangadhar: Baba says there's no need for temples or idols. Nor for fasts or vigils, rituals or pilgrimages. Holy ashes, marks on the forehead, sandalwood paste, the sacred thread and the water jug are only for show. True worship needs no pilgrimages, no cows, no Brahmins, no consecrated food, no idols, no images, whether made of stone or wood.

Brahmin II: What then does this blessed Baba of yours preach?

Gangadhar: That people should not tell lies, or discriminate on the basis of caste; that they should not take any life, whether human or animal; that they should not cut down trees or destroy forests, steal or commit adultery; that they should not give in to anger, jealousy or hatred.

Brahmin I: And you practice this?

Gangadhar: Yes, this is what we try to practice. We take a morning bath. We don't eat fish or meat, chew tobacco or smoke. We don't tell lies or speak falsehoods. We don't steal, don't look upon women with lust, don't indulge in idol worship. We've uprooted all the basil plants in the courtyard and thrown them away. We don't go

on pilgrimages. Fasts and vigils are things of the past. As are consecrated food, the company of the devil, Brahmins and priests.

Brahmin II: So this is what that Baba of yours has told you to do? Is this what your religion is about?

Gangadhar: Baba says that God is everywhere, that we should not answer hate with hate or hit back; that it's wrong to cheat anyone; that we should love our enemies as much as our friends, and love our wife and children as much as we love ourself; that it is important to respect our parents and elders, and not to bear false witness; that we should have equal respect for all human beings, no matter what caste, and give alms to the poor. These are the articles of our faith and we try to practice them.

Brahmin I: What rubbish! Show me where in the scriptures all these things are mentioned.

Gangadhar: What do you know about the scriptures? Come and listen to Baba speak if you want to learn about the scriptures.

Brahmin II: Listen here, we're Brahmins of the purest Kanyakubja stock; we arrived here at the time of King Janmejaya's great snake-sacrifice! We don't need riff-raff like you to lecture us about the scriptures. We know what abominable practices are being practised in this ashram. We know that you don't pay any heed to the sacred caste system, that you've been reading books printed on paper, that you're dabbling in Christian scriptures. You are the enemies of Hinduism. You'll be the ruin of our ancient religion. You've drawn not only men but women too to your vile ways.

(Marua *moves closer to the* Brahmin II.)

Marua: Repeat what you just said, thread-wearer.

Brahmin II: Keep away, woman. Don't you dare to come nearer. What are you up to—trying to pollute me this morning?

Marua: Yes, trying to pollute you. How come you forget about it at night? Come morning caste seems to be uppermost in your mind once again. (*Turns to* Kamali.) Kamali, isn't this the same Brahmin who runs after you too? No wonder these people can't stand Baba when he preaches equality between men and women.

Brahmin I: Woman, you've already lost your caste, so stop going on about it, will you?

Marua: So according to you Brahmins, as a woman I'm untouchable, is that right? I don't belong anywhere, is that what you think?

Brahmin II: You know very well why you were thrown out of your caste.

Marua: Just because I agreed to do the housework for a Firinghee? Why don't you treat all the Brahmins and Kshatriyas who've taken up work in Firinghee households as cooks, gardeners and torchbearers the same? Why don't you treat them all as outcastes? Just because I'm a poor woman with no one to defend me you're picking on me. Do you have so little shame that you even boast about it? But what more harm can you cause me? I'm better off now. My new home is better than those in the village.

Brahmin I: Better off? Why not! You've taken whatever tainted money from the Company came your way.

Gangadhar: Brother, it's not for you to lecture us. Don't you know that your great Lord Jagannath Temple at Puri is being run with the tainted money of the Company?

Marua: And don't forget who went to welcome the Company when it invaded Orissa! Who other than the good Brahmin priests and attendants from the holy temple?

Brahmin II: This woman has gone mad. That's what happens if you give women a little freedom.

Marua: Women, women! Stop complaining about them, will you? Hey Laxmi, Devika, Daani, what are you all waiting for? Come, give me a hand, help me throttle this lousy Brahmin. Kamali, come here, woman.

(Kamali *moves closer to* Brahmin II.)

Brahmin II: (*Backs away.*) All right, all right. Let's have it out with your Sundara Baba once and for all; we've had enough. How long can we shut our eyes to the abominations going on here? Just exactly what does go on here day and night? Why are all these women hanging around?

Kamali: But no problem that the men are, huh? Women should stay at home, is that right? Women, stay at home, cook, look after the babies, take care of the lord and master, keep the household running! Eat only crumbs and leftovers, swallow insults cheerfully, accept the slaps, kicks and blows gracefully; hide indoors, don't ever stay outside for a moment. (*Points to the Brahmins.*) Look how angry they're getting just because Sundara Baba treats men and women equal! That's what makes them see red, isn't it, Laxmi?

Laxmi: What more is there to say? Sundara Baba is like God to us. (*She crosses over to her husband,* Ramachandra.) Could I have married this man without Baba's blessings? When my father fixed my marriage with somebody else for five bharans of paddy and fifty rupees I refused to be sold like cattle. (Ramachandra *puts his arm around her protectively.*) It was Baba who saved me.

Devika: Remember how I kept losing one child after another no sooner than they were born? The Brahmins hit upon the silly idea of taking me and my husband through the wedding rituals again, but that didn't help. It was only after we took refuge here in Baba's holy ashram that the terrible problem ended. Our last three children have survived.

Marua: Say what you will, but the Firinghees show respect to women. And it's the same way in Baba's ashram. Baba makes no difference between men and women.

Brahmin I: I'm waiting for your Baba to come out of his hut. I can't wait to give him a piece of my mind.

(Balabhadra *goes inside and comes out carrying a bundle. Everyone falls silent. He walks up to* Gangadhar.)

Balabhadra: I'm off. Tell Baba I couldn't stand this place any longer.

Gangadhar: Boy, nobody invited you here in the first place. You came of your own accord, after narrowly escaping being sacrificed by the Kondhs. Nobody's forcing you to stay; you're free to leave.

Marua: But where are you going to go? Six months in the ashram and you've completely forgotten your past. Some people have short memories! How can you say you were better off with the Kondhs?

Didn't you realize they were fattening you up so that there would be enough flesh for everyone when you were sacrificed? You'd have been buried in their turmeric fields. Go, go back to the Kondhs.

Go and eat to your fill and get fat and be sacrificed.

(Balabhadra *storms out, but returns immediately in great agitation.*)

Balabhadra: A white man's headed this way.

Marua: Scared out of your wits, boy? Let the Firinghee come, he's not going to gobble you up.

(*Enter old padre* Bampton, *dressed like a native in dhoti and vest. He is barefooted.*)

Bampton: (*To himself.*) Where's my horse? Where's it gone? (*He looks around. The sight of a congregation gladdens his heart. He begins to preach with a song*).

Who else other than
Our Lord Jesus Christ
Can save us
From this world of sin?
It's only He
The son of God
The only saviour!
He who prays to Him
Is redeemed.

My dear brothers and sisters! Have you any idea what brings me here?

Marua: Your horse! (*Mimicks him.*) Where's my horse, where's it gone?

Bampton: So what if my horse isn't here? You good people are!

Marua: You want to ride us or what?

Bampton: I'll show you the path to redemption. How to escape hell! Hell is all fire, brimstone and the stench of sulphur. The Holy Bible says all sinners are damned and human beings are sinful by nature. But there's still hope.

Let me tell you about it. There's only one God and He loves us all.

Marua: Loves only you Christians.

Bampton: He loves Hindus too. God has a Son and His name is Jesus Christ. Jesu Krista, you may call Him. Jesu Krista was originally with God the Father. But God the Father was so concerned about this sinful world of ours that He sacrificed His son. He who puts his faith in Him will not only be saved but will enjoy eternal life. Jesu Krista sacrificed His own life for our sins. If we put our trust in Him, His blood will save us from damnation. This is the secret of salvation. There is no other path to redemption. He's the only redeemer, there is no other. Amen. Bring my horse.

(Bampton *takes out the watch tucked in at his waist and, singing 'Who else can save', hurries out as if he has just remembered that he should be somewhere else. A moment later he returns, takes a good look at the gathering and says to himself, 'No, my horse isn't here', and exits.*)

Marua: Of course your horse isn't here. There're only human beings here.

Ramachandra: Who was that clown, Marua? Why's a Firinghee dressed so strangely?

Marua: Surely you don't expect me to know all the Firinghees! That man spoke like a padre but wasn't dressed like one. He could be a padre gone mad. Whites too have their fair share of madmen. (*Mimicks.*) Bring my horse. Oh my!

(Balabhadra *looks around and finds* Bampton *gone.*)

Balabhadra: The fellow's nowhere to be seen.

Gangadhar: Be off then, if you must.

Balabhadra: I'd like to stay, but I feel very homesick.

Gangadhar: Go home then.

Balabhadra: On second thought, I won't go home. If my people could sell me to Death for a few rupees, why should I go back? I'll go somewhere else, Goodbye. Goodbye to you all. This time I'm really off.

Marua: Goodbye, Moonface. Don't let the sight of a Firinghee scare you into scampering back.

(Balabhadra *leaves in a huff. The very next moment, he's back, shaking with fear. He has lost his bundle somewhere. He runs to* Ramachandra *and clings to him.*)

Ramachandra: What's the matter now?

Balabhadra: They're here, they're here! They're going to catch me again.

Ramachandra: Who?

Balabhadra: The Kondhs, the hill people.

(*Enter* Ratana Pana *and* Buda Munda. Balabhadra *tries to hide.*)

Buda Munda: He made a fool of old Buda Munda and escaped. The moment we were a little tipsy he slipped the chains off his hands and legs and ran away. But look, Ratana Pana, what did I tell you? Didn't I tell you I'd find him even if I had to go to the end of the earth?

Ratana Pana: See to it he doesn't give us the slip a second time.

Buda Munda: This time I'll put the axe to his neck myself.

(*They move closer to catch hold of* Balabhadra.)

Gangadhar: Stop it! This is an ashram, for heaven's sake, not some godforsaken hole in the hills. None of your antics here!

Buda Munda: Hand us over our meria and we'll be gone.

(Gangadhar *looks at* Marua *playfully as if wondering if it wouldn't be a good idea to hand over* Balabhadra *to the tribesmen.* Marua *nods in assent.* Balabhadra *joins his palms in supplication, pulls his own ears, indicating he'll never again talk of leaving the ashram.*)

Gangadhar: Look, these aren't the dark hills you people come from. Go away without causing trouble, or else we'll get the police to handcuff you and haul you off to jail.

(*The tribesmen pay no heed and chase* Balabhadra, *who ducks behind* Brahmin I *and pushes* Brahmin II *towards* Buda Munda. *In his confusion,* Buda Munda *grabs* Brahmin II, *but releases him immediately after realising his mistake.*)

Brahmin II: (*Begins to howl.*) I've been sullied! I've been polluted! I've lost my caste!

(*The commotion takes some time to subside.* Sundardas *is seen standing on the platform. His head is shaved; he's old but full of energy. His face is creased in a smile.*)

Sundardas: There are a lot of visitors today. (*Looks around.*) Gangadhar, Ramachandra, Laxmi, Devika, Kamali, Daani, Marua, Balabhadra. Who're the new faces, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: (*Points out*) These two Brahmins are from Chowdwar. They've come to engage you in a debate on the scriptures. (Brahmin I *and* Brahmin II *seem distinctly uncomfortable.*) And these two are from the hills.

Sundardas: Very well. But why was there such a commotion a few moments ago?

Gangadhar: The hill people want to take Balabhadra back with them.

Sundardas: Very well.

Balabhadra: Very well? Baba, they want to sacrifice me to their god.

Sundardas: A human sacrifice? What do the scriptures have to say about that?

Gangadhar: (*Looks at the Brahmins, who hang their heads.*) Satpath Brahman has references to animal sacrifice. But all it discusses is the distribution of the sacrificial meat.

Sundardas: And on the subject of human sacrifice?

Gangadhar: The Yajur Veda mentions human sacrifice. The relevant mantras are to be found in the Taittiriya Samhita. The ones indulging in it were the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas who wished to rise to greater heights.

Sundardas: Is that what these men from the hills want—to rise to the top? *(Looks at* Ratana Pana *and* Buda Munda.) What do they want?

Gangadhar: They want to propitiate Mother Earth with a human sacrifice.

Buda Munda: Enough discussion. Hand the boy over and then we'll leave. We paid good money for him.

Sundardas: You bought a human being? What do the scriptures say about that, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Aitareya Brahman has it that King Harischandra had promised to sacrifice his own son Rohit to Varun, the water-god. Rohit went around looking for someone to take his place and finally found a Brahmin named Ajigarta, who was willing to sell his second son Sunahsepa. Rohit bought him with a hundred cows.

Sundardas: How awful! How unjust! Was Sunahsepa sacrificed?

Gangadhar: No. The priests refused to tie him to the sacrificial stake.

Sundardas: What happened then?

Gangadhar: For another hundred cows Ajigarta himself tied his son to the stake. But the priests refused to put the knife to the boy's throat. The father was willing to do it himself for another hundred cows.

Sundardas: So in the end it was the father who killed his own son?

Gangadhar: Mercifully, no. Sunahsepa prayed to the Gods. Verse after verse, the cords that bound him came undone. He was freed.

Sundardas: And father and son were reunited?

Gangadhar: The boy refused to go back to his father. He said any father willing to kill his own son for three hundred cows did not deserve to have one.

Sundardas: Greed and human sacrifice are equally abominable. (*Looks at* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana.) Could you understand, even a little?

Ratana Pana: We don't have to. We paid twenty-five rupees to the father of this boy and saved him to be sacrificed. From time immemorial we have been offering human sacrifices to Mother Earth. If we stop, our god will become annoyed and our fields will turn barren. We've got to take back the meria.

Sundardas: Anything in the scriptures in their favour, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Kautilya talks of the practice of buying and selling bipeds. Any deceitful transaction had a penalty of twelve pons. If somebody lost a slave, he had to pay five pons to get him back. If somebody forcibly captured a temple slave he deserved the severest punishment. But there's no reference to human beings bought to be sacrificed, who run away.

Sundardas: What does the Book have to say about it?

Gangadhar: In the Old Testament it just says: And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death.

Sundardas: (*Looks solemnly at* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana.) Capital punishment!

Buda Munda: Capital punishment or whatever, but we refuse to budge without the boy. Without a sacrifice our lands will remain barren and there'll be a famine. You want us to die of starvation?

Brahmin I: Not only you, but everyone else will die. The Kaliyug isn't far off, considering how low we seem to have plunged.

Sundardas: The Kaliyug? What will happen in the Kaliyug?

Brahmin II: There will be droughts, famines, natural calamities. There's a long chapter about it in the holy Bhagavat. (He and Brahmin I *start in a singsong voice, each quoting one line.*)

The rich will rule the earth.
Women will choose their partners.
Upstarts, proud wretches will be in power.
Virtuous men will be ignored.
Women will consort with their own kind
    and men with men.
Whores will be more sought after than good women.
People will forsake their caste.
There will be free mingling of the castes
and ignoble paths will seem attractive.
Anarchy will rule.
The King of Gods will give no rains
and famines will visit the land.

Sundardas: Did you hear that, children? There're famines in the offing.

Brahmin I: That's not all. *(Sings.)*

Righteousness of every kind shall vanish.
The tribe of criminals shall increase.

Rulers will turn robbers
and the ruled will revel
in thieving, lying, quarrelling and back-stabbing.
Even cows will become worse than goats
and eat whatever they never should
and their milk will turn into poison.
There will be no crops, nor anything else.
Pitiful rains and no cultivation.
Homes will be deserted
and men will take to begging
even as they toil like donkeys.
And like fish to water, women
will take to adultery.

Ratana Pana: Save your scriptures for later, and settle our problem first. We're in a hurry to get back home with our meria.

Sundardas: Have something to eat first.

(Ramachandra *invites them to have something to eat, but they decline and do not move.*)

Sundardas: What a fine discussion on the Kaliyug, thanks to the ever so enlightened Brahmins of Chowdwar. But why should the Kaliyug be upon us at all? I foresee good times, a bright future. Does the Book have anything to say about the future, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: (*Reading from the Bible.*) The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den.

Sundardas: Children, you've heard readings from both the Bhagavat and the Bible. Now listen to what I have to say. Sundardas foresees a golden era of peace and prosperity on earth. Injustice,

disputes, lies and exploitation will disappear. Cows will come back home from the fields without having to be herded, countries will have no boundaries and homes no dividing walls. Everyone will be happy and live in plenty. All humanity will live as brothers and sisters. There will be no wars, no differences, no fights, no diseases, no suffering, no stealing, no lies, no adultery. Tigers and lambs will share the same watering hole. Lions and tigers will befriend human beings. Clouds will pour rain wherever there is need of water. Harvests will be golden. Human beings will realise that they're a part of God. Men and women will wear rich silk clothes and pray together without segregation and realise godhood. (*Pause.*) There's more that Sundardas is able to foresee. The Firinghees who now rule Orissa, after the Moghuls and the Marathas, will come to Sundardas.

(*Enter a young white* Soldier, *as if on a cue. He seems to be in a tearing hurry. He looks around.* Sundardas *notices him, and a smile lights up his face.* Sundardas *continues.*)

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and stand before Sundardas his head bowed.

(*Let alone bow his head, the* Soldier *looks around with unconcealed insolence. He seems to be searching for somebody.*)

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and bow his head before Sundardas.

(*No change in the* Soldier's *attitude.* Sundardas *beckons to* Ramachandra *and whispers something in his ear.* Ramachandra *goes inside the hut. The* Soldier *continues his search and seems to zero in on* Balabhadra. Balabhadra *ducks behind a group of people, trying to escape. The* Soldier *looks for him. Meanwhile* Ramachandra *brings* Sundardas *an old battle fatigue which* Sundardas *puts on. The* Soldier, *engrossed in his search, is completely unaware of what is happening. 'Attention!'* Sundardas *commands in a booming voice. The* Soldier *is startled and salutes him.*)

Sundardas: The Firinghee will come and bow before Sundardas. (*The* Soldier *bows his head.*) The Firinghee will accept Sundardas as the only teacher and follow his precepts.

He pauses. There is silence.

Sundardas: Children, did you see that? The young white boy here became afraid because of how I am dressed. Now, what does that teach you? This: that we see only the clothes, the exterior, and not what is within. Unless we go beyond clothes, unless we cast them aside, how can we journey within? How can we realise ourselves? (*He takes off the uniform.*) Learn to ignore how people are dressed. Whether I wear these clothes or others, I remain who I am: Sundardas. Think of clay. You can make all sorts of things out of it—bowls, pitchers, plates and cups. Only the names are different, the basic material remains the same. The clay is fundamental to them all, the clay is the truth; the pitchers and vessels are only forms. You must be able to see the clay in them. Just as you must recognise yourselves underneath what you wear. (*Pauses. Raising his hand, he plucks a flower out of air.*) Look at this flower. Just as it has several petals, the human mind too has several layers, several forms; each encloses the mind like a petal. (*He plucks a petal.*) The commands of parents. (*Plucks another petal.*) The advice of elders. (*Plucks yet another.*) The guru's teachings. (*Another petal goes.*) The priest's injunctions. (*Another petal.*) The social code. (*Looks at the flower in his hand.*) Only one more petal is left. What it is—the soul? Or just another form, a covering, an influence? Let's throw that one away too. (*Lets it drop.*) So what remains? What remains is the atman. Nothing, you might say, there's nothing. But that nothingness is the atman. The Brahman is nothingness. How can one describe nothingness? One cannot ever describe what it is, one can only say what it is not. The Brahman is not you or I. It has no shape, no length, no breadth, no boundaries. It's not creation, nor conservation, nor destruction. Neither male, nor female. Not will, not time. Not striving, nor desire. Not memory, nor roots; not theories, nor explanations, whether subtle or crude; not scriptures, not holy books. Not castes or creeds; not colours or shapes. Not light, nor darkness. Not one, not many. Not the beginning, nor the end. Not birth, not living, not death. Not writing, nor the writer. Not the doer, nor the

done. Not heaven, nor hell. Neither good nor bad. Neither right nor wrong. Not emotion, not devotion. Not salvation, not liberation, not the achiever, not the achievement. Not samadhi, not *yoga.* Not disease. Not sleep nor wakefulness, not dreams either. There's nothing in the Brahman. It is not anywhere, not in anything. Once in northern India there was a holy man named Kabir who said:

Not in centres of pilgrimage,
Not in idols, not in solitary abodes,
Not in mosques, nor in temples,
Not in Kashi, nor in Kailash.

Kabir mentioned mosques because we know about mosques; the Muslims had been around for a long time. But now a new people have come to us—the Firinghees. How many years ago did they arrive, Gangadhar?

Gangadhar: Twenty-three.

Sundardas: Twenty-three years already? How quickly time passes. The Firinghees have a religion of their own just as the Muslims do. Gangadhar, enlighten these children about how we came to know about the Firinghee religion.

Gangadhar: The Christian padres started preaching their religion in this country a couple of years ago. They printed books and distributed them to people in the crowded marketplaces. Once Krupasindhu got a book of questions and answers from these people when he went to the Tangi market. This was a Catechism. When Radhu Das went to Cuttack to buy sugar, he found a padre distributing a book called the Ten Commandments in Chowdhury Bazaar and brought a copy back.

Sundardas: When I read those books I nearly danced with joy. Children, I said, what a treasure you've got me at last! This is it! These are the basic things. The ethics, the rules of the right way to live. Then my boys went looking for the padres and collected from them the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Gospels. But there's nothing to beat this one book—the Ten Commandments. All the rules of good

behaviour have been reduced to just ten. Sundardas too had spoken of these things before, but not with the same lucidity and clarity. Gangadhar, recite the Ten Commandments.

Gangadhar: The Ten Commandments of the Lord are: I am the Lord the God, thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, thou shalt not bow down thyself to them. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honour thy father and thy mother. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, wife, manservant, maidservant nor his goods.

Sundardas: How wonderful, how true! It feels good just to hear them over and over again. So I began telling our people about these commandments. And I told my devoted disciples: Dear children, go spread the good word. Gangadhar, tell me: Krupasindhu and Radhu Das were supposed to leave yesterday to preach the Ten Commandments, did they go?

Gangadhar: Yes, they did, Baba.

Sundardas: (*Turns to* Devika.) Has Krupasindhu left?

Devika: Yes, Baba.

Sundardas: Oh, we've completely forgotten our Firinghee soldier. (*Turns to him.*) Young man, what brings you here?

Marua: He might be looking for his horse.

(*The* Soldier *looks on uncomprehendingly.*)

Marua: Spill it out, moonface. Tell us what or who you're looking for.

Soldier: (*Speaks in a clipped soldierly style.*) I'm looking for a native infantry soldier who's run away after beating the commissioner's horse-cab driver with a stick.

Sundardas: There doesn't seem to be any native soldier around here.

(*The* Soldier *stares into the faces and grabs* Balabhadra, *mistaking him for the runaway soldier.* Buda Munda *and* Ratana Pana *grab* Balabhadra's *free arm and pull him towards them. After a few pulls and counter-pulls, the soldier glares at the tribesmen in anger, draws his pistol and chases them away. The two men run for dear life and never return. The* Soldier *stares into* Balabhadra's *face closely and decides he's not the man he's looking for, shakes his head and lets* Balabhadra *go. Saluting* Sundardas, *he exits.*)

Marua: Goodbye, Moonface. Go in peace. Hope you soon run into your horse and the missing native soldier.

Sundardas: That takes care of the hill thugs and the soldier. Does anyone else here have a problem?

Kamali: Baba, my husband beats me regularly. He says our child perished because we stopped worshipping idols. But I say God took back our child. Let my husband follow his faith and leave me to mine. Am I not right, Baba?

Sundardas: Absolutely.

Kamali: My husband has threatened to kill me if I don't go back to worshipping idols. And my father beats my mother for the same reason.

Daani: They treat us like cats and dogs, Baba. They tie us up and beat the life out of us.

Sundardas: Praise be to you, mother. One must suffer to remain true to one's faith. Think what Jesus Christ went through. You'll find God, I tell you. There are good days ahead.

Daani: May your words come true, Baba.

Sundardas: Of course they will. (*Looks at* Brahmin I.) Shall we then begin our discussion of the scriptures?

Brahmin I (*raises a finger and goes away to relieve himself*).

Sundardas: (*Looks at* Brahmin II.) Stay here until your friend comes back. Only a little while ago you were in splits about horses. Do you know what the Brihadaranyak Upanishad has to say?

Brahmin II *shakes his head.*

Sundardas: The human body is a chariot and the senses are horses.

(Brahmin II *tucks his sacred thread around his ear indicating that he also needs to relieve himself.*)

Sundardas: The atman rides the chariot; wisdom is the charioteer and the mind is the land over which the chariot rolls.

(Brahmin II *makes his escape at the first opportunity.* Sundardas *looks up at the sun; it is late in the day. He looks around and finds* Marua *collecting the petals from the ground.* Sundardas *gives her a smile and plucks another flower from the air and is about to present it to her.*

Enter Krupasindhu Sahu *and* Radhu Das, *screaming and crying: 'We were almost killed.' They prostrate themselves before* Sundardas. *He picks them up lovingly and pats them on the back.* Devika, Krupasindhu's *wife, attends to her husband.* Sundardas *attends to* Radhu Das.)

Sundardas: Woe is me, what am I witnessing, Krupasindhu, my son? Who subjected my poor Radhu to such torture?

Radhu Das: Baba, we went to Bhairavpur yesterday to preach the Ten Commandments. It seems only a few days ago a mad padre had been there to preach Christianity and the villagers had chased him out of the village. The moment we started preaching they began to call us names. I warned Krupasindhu that we'd do well to leave, but he wouldn't budge until he had recited all the commandments.

Krupasindhu: By then the villagers had armed themselves with sticks and rocks. We've chased out a white padre, they shouted, we know how to deal with Blackies; you're no match for us. Then they fell upon us and started beating us within an inch of our lives. But the more they beat the louder I went on about the commandments.

Sundardas: That's terrible, a grave injustice. Gangadhar and Ramachandra, go to Cuttack and inform the padres. We must consult with them. Tell them that Sundardas wants them to come to Kujibar at once. Let them see with their own eyes the plight my children have suffered as a result of preaching their Ten Commandments. Let them

tell us how we should go about it. Children, carry Krupasindhu and Radhu Das inside. Take care of them.

(*The disciples carry* Krupasindhu *and* Radhu Das *inside.* Sundardas *notices the flower in his hand and gives it to* Marua. *Everyone watches him with deep respect and fascination.*)

Translation: Paul St-Pierre, K. K. Mohapatra
and Leelawati Mohapatra

3

Before the Sunset

(Excerpt)

ACT ONE

Deepankar: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I am Deepankar. Some of you may be knowing me already. I am quite well up in the social set up in this city. I am Number Two in my Office. I have got a house, a car, a working wife, and a bank balance. You may be finding it rather odd that I should be telling you all this at the start of the play. But you will see for yourself later how important this introduction is. I might as well tell you that the whole thing started from a New Year's Greeting Card which said:

Wishing you
Peace and Love
Joy and Success
And also wishing you
All that you wish for yourself

The card suddenly assumed some significance for me; not because it was from Saroj, but because of the message. Saroj had wished me all that I wanted for myself. When I got the card, I started thinking: what really was it that I wanted for myself; what exactly was the aim of my life?

There was a time when I had no doubts in my mind about this. Would you believe what I wanted? I wanted to become a theatre

person. I was then living with Shaw, Ibsen, Ionesco and Brecht. I wanted the stage to become a part of my life. But then what happened? I took my Law degree and joined the bar for some time; and then I became an Executive of a Company. You perhaps think that this is a very common thing. One who wanted to be a poet became a clerk; he who wanted to be a doctor became a policeman. I had a friend who did not want to be any of these. He used to write poetry and wanted to become moonlight. Someone became a lawyer instead of a doctor; someone became a businessman instead of poet. But this friend of mine, he could not become moonlight ... he is now in a lunatic asylum. Well, that's that. I am here before you this evening for a very special reason. It is my birthday today. And it is a special birthday for me, for I will be completing forty years.

Those of you who have not touched this border line of middle age will not understand the horrors of this age. At this turning point everything in your life changes. Your hair become grey. Your nerves become weak. Your own self-confidence gets shaken. You are afraid of heart-attack and have by this time already taken the first E.C.G. Your daughter is growing up and you are becoming conscious of her virginity. Whatever personal ambitions and aims you had, which you believed you would achieve one day, you discover suddenly are beyond your reach. The evening of your life has started. It is now only a waiting for the nightfall.

This evening of one's life is also a kind of challenge. At this juncture one tries to hold back the last flicker of the sunshine. You might have come across the news item about the middle-aged bank clerk who did his regular turn in the office for twenty years and led an ideal family life, but one fine morning he resigned his job, re-married and vanished from the city. Take Paul Gauguin. Suddenly one day, he left his home and went far away to pursue painting. I have arrived at such a crucial moment; I have to take the momentous decision today; this very day. Before I am forty. If I let this day slip by, I will get lost in my daily existence. The sun will set, and the rest of my life will only be one long night.

Translation: The Playwright

Nonsense Verses

Alimalika
(Translation: The Poet)

TRANSLATION

Line to line, going by the books
He must rhyme it by hooks or crooks.
What results is rather odd
It's neither monkey nor god,
A god-faced monkey is how it looks.

AIRWORTHIES

The cormorant drowned in a shallow gorge;
The pigeon did fly to his home, by George.
The kingfisher dove into the jaws of a shark
What a sad face has this poor little lark!
The owl missed the signs on the Athens road;
The albatross was crushed under a wearisome load.
The woodpecker was barred from going into the woods
The mynah is in one of its mournful moods.
The ostrich groans with a colic pain
The parrot has to learn its lessons again.
The petrel has lost its way to the sea
The oriole was honoured with an O.B.E.

DEFECTION

The crafty legislator caught in the defection game
Left Party B and member of Party A became

Not being made a minister
He imagined intrigues sinister
And said: ABCD—they are all one and the same.

BETTER THAN BEST

Whose is the hoarsest call?
Answered the doggie: bho bho.
Which tobacco is best of all?
The jackal said: Hookah ho.

Which would be sweetest note?
The frog croaked: katar kay;
Which month is stifling hot?
The goat said: May, May!

HINDI CLASS

The creatures learning Hindi
Kicked up quite a shindy.
From amidst all the brouhaha
The jackal asked: kya hua?
Joining the abysmal howl
Han han hoon, said the owl.
Not to be left out at that
Main aoon? said the cat.

THE MONKEY AND THE OWL

A funny pair—the monkey and the owl
Lived on a tree branch cheek by jowl.
Quarrelled one day and sulking
Spent a whole week without talking
Scowls on their faces—what a howl!

THE CROSSING

Tiger, boatman, betel leaves, goat
Have to cross the river on a boat.
Only two at a time the boat can take;
To carry all four how many trips will it make?

The goat ate the betel leaves
The boatman ate the goat
The tiger ate the boatman
And got up the boat.
And thus that all the four to take
It had just a single trip to make.

NIGHT IN THE DAKBUNGALOW

As soon as I had put out the light,
I saw a million mosquitoes alight.
They sure would have flown me to space,
But by good luck I was held in place
By a billion bedbugs who gripped me tight.

COCK AND BULL

They kept teaching him kukudu-koon,
But he only said cock-a-doodle-do.
Cocky Mr. Cock,
(You laughing stock)
You push your luck,
Tandoori is out and you are stew.

SANSKRIT TEST

In the class for the Sanskrit test
Were cows, buffaloes and the rest.
Bhoh, bhoh said the dog to the teacher
And only he passed, the clever creature.

VILLAINS

The frog keeps croaking,
It gets hoarser;
The elephant takes
A spin in his roadster.
The owl's uncle
And the monkey's niece
Are verily the villains
Of the piece.

BHAGIRATHI BHAINA

He, of Bhirokhol, Bhagirathi Bhaina
Made up his mind to go to China.
A visa he couldn't get
But by the travel bug beset
Went to the zoo instead
To look at the hyena.

SADANAND SATPATHY

He, of Sarankul, Babu Sadanand Satpathy
Went off riding his brand new phatphati
The red traffic light
He crossed with delight
And thus did the babu attain sadati.

FEAR

The goat is terrified of the tiger
The tiger is frightened of the figer
The figer is fearful of the goat—
They are all in the very same boat.

IKE, NEVER

I like Ryan, Meg,
I like a chicken leg,
But what I really like
Is a proper Patiala peg.

DOGGEREL

The lapdog said, bow-wow.
His sahib said, now now!
The pidog said, bhoh bhoh,
His babu said, oh, ho!

PROF. PAL D.

The haughty Prof. Pal D.
Wanted everything jaldi;
Ever in despair
He'd tear his hair
In no time became a baldy.

THREET

The horrible creature threet
Poor twoot he'd browbeat;
But seeing fourt
Come to court
He'd shrink and retreat.

GET REAL

For me prose if fine
Even poetry I don't mind,
But what I'd really love
Is to have some wine.

LAUGHING STOCK

If you think the camel
Is a comical mammal
At which you can laugh,
What about the yak
And the aardvark
And, above all, the giraffe?

ESSAYS

1

The Poet and Society

> Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportioned to their ability as writers. This is their main use. All other uses are relative and temporary.
>
> Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*

> A bird does not sing because it has an answer; it sings because it has a song.
>
> Chinese Proverb

I

From the earliest times, poetry has been serving a social function, and it would seem as if it was created for that purpose. The Vedas are our earliest poetry and one part of the Vedas was the Samhita which comprised of hymns and incantations used in rituals and sacrifices. Though Samhitas were poetry, which could be read as such, their main purpose was magical like the runes and chants in Europe which were used to cure some disease, propitiate some divinity or avert the evil eye.

The other type of ancient and mediaeval poetry in India was the devotional song, comparable to the Western hymn and litany, which was addressed to particular deities and divinities. In most of the

Indian languages, the earliest poetry has been of the devotional order, including the poetry of the Bhakti poets who enriched Indian literature from the 6th till the 17th century.

A third type of poetry which existed was the lyric, song or verse play which was meant to be sung to the accompaniment of music or to be performed on the stage before an audience. These mainly aimed at entertaining people through a public performance.

All the above poetic works performed a social function—magical, devotional and entertainment—but they were also at the same time poetry which could be read by an individual for his personal enjoyment. Leaving aside the lyric, the other forms of early poetry have made room for pure poetry, as we know it today, which is literature mainly aimed at the individual reader, reading it in solitude.

Before discussing modern lyrics, mention may also be made of patriotic songs, which where written at a particular time with a particular purpose. There was a flowering of such poetry during our freedom movement and it had its heyday in the turbulent years of Quit India. Every language had its share of such of such poetry eulogizing Gandhi and tiranga and glorifying khadi and swadeshi. These poems were very popular at the time and it is true that with these songs on their lips thousands faced the police *lathi* and bullets and marched to the prison and the gallows. It is equally true, alas, that they were mostly very bad poetry. This is because the language of patriotism is not the language of imagination and fresh perception. As Mao Tse Tung famously said, a poster is not a poem. The patriotic poems had served their purpose, and were soon forgotten as literature.

The position of lyrics, which are meant to reach an audience through singing, is a little more problematic. There has always been a question whether lyrics are poetry/literature. Some years back there was a debate in England if lyrics written for films and for pop music concerts can qualify as genuine poetry, or as the question was framed: Does Bob Dylan really compete with John Keats? The problem could not be resolved, but recently Christopher Ricks, who was Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, has, in his own words, "set Dylan

among the poets." No matter how literary critics rate them, pop singers—and their lyrics (Dylan and Lennon are as much known for the words in their lyrics as for their singing)—are going great, and unconcerned about being labeled poets or not, are serving a social purpose, that of entertaining, and stimulating their audience.

II

Besides serving the society in the manner we have seen above, the poet also has a responsibility to write about society. A poet, in addition to writing poetry, also plays several other roles in society as family man, neighbour, worker and so on. He has a responsibility to society as a citizen, and also has an additional responsibility as a writer.

Our ancient aestheticians had laid down how the poet should conduct himself in society. Rajashekara (c. 9th-10th century AD) prescribed in his *Kavyamimansa* that the poet should mix freely with the masses in order to get acquainted with their modes of life and expressions. Kshemendra (11th century AD) in his *Kavikanthabharana* gives a hundred pieces of advice to poets, which include, among other things, making friends with good people, observing the skill of the artists and craftsmen, participating in the assemblies of the learned, learning provincial dialects and so on. All these were no doubt meant to make him a better poet, by portraying the society with better understanding. This would be possible if the poet is not only a good member of the society, but a good student of the society as well.

Poets have always tried to represent themselves as solitary individuals different from the rest of the society, inasmuch as both writing and reading poetry are reclusive activities. The society itself seems to accept that poets are social outsiders and may behave differently from the rest of its members, and myths of personal flamboyance and unsocial behaviour are common. But it is not universally so, and it has been said that for every hairy Walt Whitman or boozy Dylan Thomas, there has been a smooth-faced, publicly retiring Wallace Stevens or Philip Larkin.

While preferring to position himself outside the larger community, the poet, however, refuses to be called an elitist and claims to voice the feelings and aspirations of the society, specially those of its lower classes—the common man and the underdog. The Bangla poet Premendra Mitra claimed: "I am the poet of blacksmiths and coppersmiths and carpenters and porters and labourers; I am the poet of the lowly of the low."

Tagore, who was himself accused of being an elitist, writing only about the higher classes, was more circumspect and truthful and set the record straight in a poem he wrote a few months before his death. The poem "Aikatan" (Symphony) says: "The world moves on the support of the peasant, the weaver and the fisherman. I live in a small corner, in the perpetual exile of prestige, seated by a narrow window of society's high platform. Sometimes I have ventured near their homes, but have lacked the courage to enter.... So I accept the blame and admit the incompleteness of my songs."

This description of the relationship of the poet to the lower classes of society should apply to most poets, though few will have the courage or honesty to admit it.

III

Literature has been described as the expression of the society which has produced it, and works of literature understood as the upshot of the moment, the race and the milieu. To these was later added the Marxist theory of the relation of works of literature to the economic base. And critics started evaluating literature on the basis of whether it reflects social and political concerns.

An example of such criticism is an article by Jayanta Mahapatra on Oriya poetry, wherein he states: "Contemporary" Oriya poetry appears to have been dominated in the last five decades by practitioners who have not found (or possibly did not find) much use for incorporating their own living world into their poems. In other words, this highly praised, so-called successful poetry has completely sidelined relevant social and political issues, those that matter to the

ordinary individual. The poetry has been one of 'escape', evolving around the same old myths poets were talking about a hundred years ago." (The Book Review, December 2000)

Mahapatra was perhaps making a dig at the highly successful collection of Oriya poems on Radha, which draws on the *Bhagavata Purana* myth. It is true that some senior Oriya poets have steered clear of the social and the political and have restricted themselves to philosophical and aesthetic subjects; but it is equally true that a host of other poets have made it their concern to write about the burning issues of their times, and have produced equally good poetry. While the critics can be held responsible for the high praise lavished on the former, it is perhaps only a sociologist who can explain the success of their poems. We have come a long way from the 19th century Aestheticism which rejected the notion that art should have a social or moral purpose. So the poets who are writing about the lives and problems of the common man should be given their due by both literary critics and readers.

One might add a note of caution here. The poet's concern for the common man must be truly felt and its articulation must be genuine; the poetry must come from the heart and not because it is the latest trend. As a matter of fact, in the very same poem quoted above, Tagore had warned against such poetic pretensions: "It is not good to acquire a name without paying the price; false is such fashionable love for the labourer."

The other question is whether the poet, while posing social and political situations and problems, should offer a solution. I think this is a task best left to economists, journalists, sociologists and politicians. As Chekhov said, "Between the solution of a question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist." It is, therefore, enough for the poet to voice his anger and protest at the social wrongs, without trying to find a remedy.

IV

What, then, is the role of poetry in society? Is poetry going to change the society?

Unfortunately, there is a lot of expectation from poets as to their social role, though there is no such expectation from other creative artists like painters, dancers or actors. Every two bit politician is exhorting poets to write poems which will spell the doom of social ills.

We should accept the fact that poetry has a very limited role in this context, "for poetry makes nothing happen". The same could perhaps be said of literature generally (with the exception of a few books like Dickens' novels, The *Grapes of Wrath* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), as also of other arts. Picasso's "Guernica" was a great piece of art which documented the brutality and meaninglessness of war. But as Sartre said, he doubted if "Guernica" won a single supporter for the Spanish cause. It is best to admit the limits of poetry's power.

Having said that, let me, as an exception, cite at least one poem that is supposed to have changed the course of history in 1878. It was a music hall song which ran: "We don't want to fight, but by Jingo if we do; we've got the ships, we've got the men, we've got the money too." When the song was sung everywhere in the streets of London, it whipped up a popular "jingoistic" feeling which, besides giving a new word to English language, forced upon the British Government the decision to go to war with Russia. We can compare this poem to our own patriotic songs of the pre-independent India.

The other example I would like to cite is the poetry of our Bhakti poets. The Bhakti movement which moved in continuing waves from one region to another, beginning in the South in the 6th century, played a crucial role in shaping the socio-cultural and religious life of people of all religions in India. The poets helped in synthesizing traditions in theology and allowed many streams of thought and practices to coexist, sometimes merging with one another. Writing in regional languages rather than in Sanskrit, they drew heavily on the mysticism in both Hindu and Muslim traditions, shared many philosophical traits of Bhaktas and Sufis and thus prevented the kind of religious persecution that happened in Europe. They freed the devotees from the clutches of the Brahmin clergy, promoted the local language against Sanskritic hegemony, and provided it with greater variety of language and dictum and promoted a sense of community.

They also provided a basis for removing caste and gender discrimination, as is evident from the rise of poets from the non-Brahmin castes, Muslims and women.

The movement, unfortunately, has no other parallel in Indian literature.

V

I will make one final point about poetry and society, and that is the role of poet as activist. It is a romantic picture, and the classic instance of the poet-activist is Baudelaire in the February Revolution, 1848. Baudelaire arrived to find the fighting over, but joined a crowd which had just looted a gunsmith's, and fired his first shot with a new gun, and shouted, "We must go and shoot the general". The incident encapsulates almost every recurring feature in the long connection between poets and revolution or the poet as activist: the cheerful ignorance of the issues involved, the brevity and the futility of the participation; the desire to experience the thrill of action without any of its tedious preparation or painful consequences; and above all, the blithe confusion of the personal and the public. When Baudelaire declared that his prime target was his step-father, the general, his statement would have added a delightful irony, except that it was a situation where people were being killed.

A more recent example of literary activism was the participation of the International Brigade of Writers in the Spanish Civil War, which Stephen Spender called the poets' war. Hemingway reported it. Orwell fought and was wounded, Koestler was a propagandist. Auden drove an ambulance. Lorca lost his life. Writers lived their books, journalists made their news. But in the end, Republicans lost and as Camus wrote, "Men have learned that one can be right and yet be beaten, that force can vanquish spirit, that courage is not its own recompense." The most literary brigade in the history of warfare had, however, made its point; it had made the world sit up and take notice.

VI

Let me say, in conclusion, that poetry cannot claim to serve no end beyond itself, and the poet cannot shirk his responsibility to articulate social, moral and political concerns in his poetry. For the poet, the personal is political, and he must act the guilty conscience of his times. It must, however, be added that to be true to poetry, it ought to be a really felt experience of the poet and not a mere fashion statement.

Further, poetry cannot be mere rhetoric, propaganda or advocacy, for in that case it will cease to be poetry. There must be something in the poem to take it beyond the immediacy of a current problem to bigger truths and greater realization.

The poet need not try to offer solutions; it is enough that he poses the problem correctly and truthfully. We should not pass a law that imposes on poetry the burden of improving society.

If poetry could make the reader feel and think, it would have served its purpose. "Guernica" may not have recruited soldiers to the Spanish cause, but it certainly did outrage the conscience of the world. Poetry should seek to do that.

It has been rightly suggested that in the case of poetry, the words 'audience', 'reader' and 'listener' should be replaced by the word 'witness', for the poet and his audience are bound together while witnessing what is happening around them in the society within a relationship of artistic exchange. Let us all be witnesses to poetry and society.

2

Fakirmohan's Life and Work: An Overview

While giving an overview of Fakirmohan's life and work, one must start with a brief account of Orissa in the 19th century. This is necessary not only because this will provide a background to Fakirmohan's life and works, but also because Orissa and its people and their problems were the main concern and the core of Fakirmohan's writings.

Orissa was ruled by Hindu kings as late as 1568 A.D., the year in which the last Hindu king died and the Afghans, who were already ruling Bengal, occupied Orissa. Ten years later, the Mughals defeated the Afghans and Orissa was annexed to the Mughal empire. In 1751, the Marathas defeated the Nawab of Bengal and occupied the province and ruled it for about fifty years. In 1803, the English attacked Orissa and, by a treaty, the Marathas ceded Orissa to the Honourable East India Company.

During the Afghans and the Mughals, Orissa's peasantry was crushed under heavy taxation and illegal exactions. The condition of peasants became worse under the Marathas, who plundered the land as one would an enemy country. The Maratha rule had been so atrocious, lawless and oppressive that when the English invaders came, the people of Orissa warmly welcomed them and helped them against the Marathas. The Marathas had not even spared temples from depredation and as a matter of fact, the pandas of Puri temple, while welcoming the invading army, had begged that the Jagannath temple might be placed under the protection of the British.

If the people of Orissa thought that their condition would improve under the British, they were sadly mistaken. Because of the faulty revenue policy, Orissa suffered more in the first few years of British administration than it had during the whole of Mughal and Maratha rule. The British introduced a law by which land belonging to landlords who had defaulted in payment of rent was to be auctioned at Calcutta. Landholders in Orissa could not keep track of these auctions and land passed into the hands of Bengalis, mostly petty officials and clerks under the East India Company. Bengalis were the main workforce of the company administration in Orissa and they now became landlords too. As a Bengali historian has put it, "Bengalis of a low type ruled Orissa for nearly half a century after the conquest."

During these fifty years, the people of Orissa had been further impoverished by rack-rents and the closure of indigenous industries like shipping and salt under the new economic policy. Loss of land and industries not only meant loss of wealth, it also meant loss of prestige associated with them and Oriyas became second to Bengalis in their own land.

It was during this period in Orissa's history that Brajamohan Senapati was born on January 13, 1843 in the port town of Balasore. He was orphaned at the age of three and was brought up in extreme poverty and deprivation by his old grandmother in the house of his uncle who was rather cruel and heartless. As the child suffered from various ailments, the grandmother gave him a new name, Fakirmohan, and offered him to two Muslim saints of Balasore. Though she actually did not give away the child to the saints, the young boy had to live a fakir's life for the eight days of Muharrum every year.

At the age of nine, Fakirmohan went to a village school where he studied for a couple of years. He was married at the age of thirteen, but it was an unhappy marriage for his wife was quarrelsome and hardhearted. Fakirmohan had to earn his living working for his uncle who had a business of making and repairing sail and rigging. Later, he also worked in the government salt office. When that office closed

down, Fakirmohan joined school again. Though he was good at studies, he had to discontinue school after some time as he could not pay his school fee of four annas a month. He, however, took lessons in Persian in a school and taught himself Bengali and Sanskrit. He also learnt English from a primer and with the help of a dictionary read English books like the *The Arabian Night*, *Robinson Crusoe*, the Bible and Lamb's *Shakespeare*.

When Fakirmohan was about nineteen he became a school teacher on a monthly salary of two and a half rupees. Soon after he got a break when the mission school in Balasore appointed him as headmaster on a salary of ten rupees. He was to work as a teacher for ten years till 1872, when at the age of twenty-nine he left Balasore to start a new career as administrator in various princely states of Orissa. His first job with a native prince had been arranged by John Beames, the linguist, who was then the Collector, Balasore and whom Fakirmohan had assisted in writing A Comparative Grammar of the Modern Aryan Languages of India.

During this first phase of Fakirmohan's life as a school teacher, Orissa was undergoing rapid changes in the social and cultural spheres. Fakirmohan was not only influenced by such changes, he was also instrumental in bringing about some of them. He had set up the first printing press in Balasore and brought out a journal and had founded an Oriya Language Promotion Society. There was a move at this time to impose Bengali language in schools and offices in Orissa; it was even argued that Oriya was not a separate, distinct language but was a dialect of Bengali. Fakirmohan became one of the leaders of the 'save Oriya' movement, which ultimately succeeded in preventing Bengali replacing Oriya in schools and offices. It was also around this time that Fakirmohan became a Brahmo after toying with the idea of becoming a Christian. His first wife died and he married a second time to a kind and generous lady, to whom Fakirmohan was to be devoted till her death. However, during this period, Fakirmohan had very little to show for his literary achievements; he had translated Vidyasagar's *Jeevana Charita* and had written a history of India for school children.

The second phase of Fakirmohan's life as administrator was to last a quarter of a century, from 1872 to 1896. He was an able, if sometimes ruthless, administrator and took his work seriously. He had very often to side with the princes against the peasants, and he was to regret this later in life. In 1879, he lost his six month old son and when his wife took to bed in grief, Fakirmohan arranged for the *Ramayana* to be read to her. The professional reader read the epic in such a way that nothing could be understood. For the benefit of his wife Fakirmohan took up translating the *Ramayana* and read out to her in the evening what he had translated during the day. The translation of the *Ramayana* was thus Fakirmohan's first foray into literature. Later he translated the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagawat Gita* also. In 1892 he wrote a long humorous poem called 'Utkal Bhramanam' about eminent persons of Orissa of the period. When his wife died in 1894, he wrote some poems in her memory.

The third phase of Fakirmohan's life starts in 1896 when he retired from service and settled down as a full-time writer. By this time he was a well known name in Orissa as an administrator, but with a mixed reputation. He was encouraged by the editor of a literary journal to write prose and at the age of fifty-four Fakirmohan started writing a long story. The first installment of this story was published in the journal in October 1897. This story later grew into the novel *Chhamana Athaguntha* and this first major creative work of Fakirmohan was to make literary history for several reasons.

It was for the first time in the history of Oriya literature that a book was written about real people in a language spoken by them in everyday life. Up till now, books were about gods and kings and noblemen, who were far removed from the reader. In *Chhamana Athaguntha*, however, the characters lived life and faced problems as people known to the reader did. When the novel was being serialized, villagers came to Cuttack town to watch the trial of Mangaraj, the depraved landlord in the novel, for they assumed that the writer was narrating a real happening.

When Fakirmohan translated Vidyasagar's *Jeevana Charita*, he had written in the preface that there was very little difference between

the Oriya and Bengali languages. This was true since the Sanskritised Oriya of the text books was not very different from written Bengali. This was quoted by Bengalis to prove that Oriya was not a separate language. In his novel *Chhamana Athaguntha*, Fakirmohan was now using the language of the common man of rural Orissa, which had its own distinct character and had little in common with Bengali. The language of *Chhamana Athaguntha* proved, if such proof was necessary, that Oriya was indeed a separate language.

Chhamana portrays the rural society of the time and is explicitly critical about the system which brought about the ruin of the peasantry. In the novel, Karamat Ali, who is a police daroga, had gone to Calcutta for some official work and while there had bought a zamindari in auction. Mangaraj appropriated this zamindari through bribery and deception. When he himself was undergoing trial, his unscrupulous lawyer managed to take over the estate. Fakirmohan seems to be saying that there is something basically wrong in the system which allows land to pass hands through such devious means. The novel also brings out the villagers' concern for land and the title itself—a measure of land—underlines the basic fact that land is the centre of social conflicts in rural India.

Chhamana is also a direct indictment of the British system of justice. Oriyas had welcomed the British rule because of the anarchy they had suffered at the hands of the Marathas. They had thought that once law and order were established, peace would prevail. But the legal system which the British introduced had not been tailored to the indigenous sense of morality and so failed to satisfy people. Mangaraj is convicted for the theft of a cow but is absolved of the crime of murder. Fakirmohan sums up his view of the British system of justice in a passage in *Chhamana*: "British law says, if you commit a crime and if we get legal evidence, we will punish you. The clever man says, I will ensure that you do not get any proof. The lawyer says, do not worry; give me money and I will make the black white and the white black." Fakirmohan is at his satirical best while describing the courts and their judges. In *Chhamana* when the murder trial is going on, the Sessions Judge is busy writing a letter to his dear wife!

While criticizing the British, Fakirmohan does not mince words, something no other contemporary writer of Orissa had done. Describing a village pond in *Chhamana* he says: "You Indian herons, look at the English cormorants. They come with empty pockets from a far off land and go back after eating up all the fish."

Fakirmohan's next novel was *Lachhama,* which is set in the 18th century when Marathas ruled Orissa. It describes the anarchical situation of the period and brings to life the horrors of Maratha plunder and depredation. Fakirmohan comes down heavily on Maratha mercenaries and the Oriya Hindu chieftain of the novel supports the Muslim governor of Bengal against the Marathas. In a telling passage, the chieftain's advisor tells the messenger from the Marathas: "In the five hundred years of occupation of India, the Muslims have not succeeded in doing any harm to Orissa; but sad and shameful as it is, one has to say that if there is an enemy of the holy land of Orissa, it is the Hindu Marathas." The advisor requests them in the name of religion not to desecrate the temples of Orissa.

Fakirmohan wrote two other novels, the last one published three years before his death. In his four novels, Fakirmohan covers a period of about two hundred years of Orissa's history: *Lachhma* describes the period 1720-1803, *Chhamana* 1803-1840 *Mamu* 1840-1880 and *Prayaschitta* 1880-1915. Together, these novels portray the economic, social, political and cultural life in Orissa during these two hundred years.

Between 1898 and 1915, Fakirmohan also wrote twenty short stories. While some of these so-called stories are mere historical accounts of Orissa's rich commercial past, a few others are not of great literary merit. However, at least half a dozen of his short stories are superb literary creations and can rightfully take their place among the best in any language. In his short stories, as in his novels, Fakirmohan shows his deep concern for the loss of the old Indian value system. Though Fakirmohan cannot be said to have been against the western system of education, he certainly wrote about its bad effects on social and family life. In one of his short stories, a poor old man sacrifices his all to send his son to school. After finishing school, the son becomes a

postmaster. He is now ashamed that his father, who does not know English, should be staying with him. One day he asks his peon to throw the old man out, but the peon, illiterate and ignorant of English as he is, cannot bring himself to do it. However, the old man himself goes back to his village and both father and son live happily.

It is because Fakirmohan wanted to inculcate old values in the new generation that he took so much pains to translate not only the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* but also some Upanishads and the *Bhagawat Gita*. He also wrote a kavya, *Bauddhavatar* about the enlightenment of the Buddha. A Hindu turned Brahmo, Fakirmohan himself was a very religious person and believed in the goodness of all religions. As a matter of fact, he had built a temple in the compound of his house in Balasore in which he had installed images of Jesus Christ, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya, Shankaracharya, Jagannath, the Buddha and Rammohan Roy. He called this temple Sarvdharm Samanvay Peeth (Seat of Harmony of All Religious).

As mentioned earlier, Fakirmohan's first literary creations were poems. Fakirmohan says that he had started writing poems for the entertainment of his wife and after her death, he wrote poems to provide solace to his own disturbed mind. In all, Fakirmohan has left behind more than 350 poems, most of which are simple descriptive poems lacking the creative excellence of his prose writings. One thing may, however, be noted about Fakirmohan's choice of subjects for his poems; while his contemporary Oriya poets wrote about nature and beauty and India's glorious past, Fakirmohan wrote on every possible subject including Jesus Christ, the rape of Lucretia and the Russo-Japanese war as also a long poem in popular verse form about the fundamental principles of the cooperative movement. He also wrote some essays including one on the right of Shudras to study the Vedas. However, neither readers nor critics have taken Fakirmohan seriously as a poet or essayist, which is understandable.

The last major work of Fakirmohan was his autobiography, which was written between 1915 and 1917 and was finished shortly before his death. It is a storehouse of information about Orissa of his time and is written in a style which makes it as interesting as his novels. It is

a candid autobiography in which he admits his shortcomings—his oppressions of the peasantry, his role in suppressing a tribal uprising against an oppressive raja, and his addiction to drinks. The autobiography also documents his fight to save the Oriya language from the onslaught of Bengalis, the establishment of a printing press and publication of a journal the devastation wrought by the famine of 1866 in which one-third of the population of Orissa perished, and gives a clear and detailed account of the social, cultural, political life of Oriyas during the period. The autobiography is so immensely readable and absorbing and so full of facts—and of imagination—that some have even called it Fakirmohan's fifth novel.

In these five books, Fakirmohan has left behind a vivid picture of Orissa with a wealth of information about the various facets of the life of the people. They tell us about the revenue, police and judicial systems, about agriculture, trade and industry, about education and religion, about caste and community, and about the life in villages and towns. Fakirmohan provides so many meticulous details that we know about the food taken, the dress and ornaments worn, and the social customs observed by the different sections of the people of that time. Fakirmohan has become a delight for scholars of all disciplines researching into Orissa's past.

Fakirmohan came back to Balasore, his place of birth in 1905 and he was to live there till his death in 1918. He did most of his writing there and as his stature as a writer grew, his house became a place of literary pilgrimage. However, Fakirmohan had to live the last years of his life in great unhappiness. His unhappy childhood was the result of poverty and the cruelty of his uncle. The unhappiness of his old age was due to a strained relationship with his son Mohinimohan. Fakirmohan was in poor health and lived by himself, with only the memory of his dear departed wife to keep him company.

In his earlier books, Fakirmohan had modelled his bad characters on his uncle and aunt and the good characters on his grandmother and his second wife. In the later works, there was a change in the depiction of women characters because of Fakirmohan's tension with his son and daughter-in-law. A scholar has analysed how the women in Fakirmohan's fiction, written after June 1913, are much more complex than those in his earlier works.

The last work of Fakirmohan was his autobiography, which he wrote on the eve of his life, sitting beside the tombstone of his wife. He finished it by the end of 1917 but could not see it in print before his death in June 1918. It was later serialized in a journal—the very same journal which had serialized *Chhamana* more than twenty years earlier. In 1927 Mohinimohan published it, but with arbitrary alterations, corrections, deletions and abridgements; for instance, he had removed all mention in the autobiography of Fakirmohan's addiction to drinks. This is the distorted autobiography which was available to the public till 1963 when a more authoritative edition was published after referring to the original serialized version. However, many issues of the journal were not available and eight chapters in the new edition of the book are in Mohinimohan's version. This is a great pity especially since the chapters relate to the childhood and the last years of Fakirmohan's life.

One day when Fakirmohan was reading out his translation of he *Ramayana* to his wife, she had picked up the book and said: "Why do we grieve for our lost child? Is it not only because he would have perpetuated our name? This book is our son; it will preserve our name for all time." Her words have come true. Seventy-five years after his death, Fakirmohan is today remembered for his books. Surely, *Chhamana*, the Autobiography and some of the stories will keep his name alive for all time.

3

Kuntala Kumari Sabat: A Brief Introduction to Her Life and Works

Kuntala Kumari Sabat was born on the 8th February 1901 in an Oriya Christian family in Bastar where her father was working as a doctor. When she was a year old, her father took a job in Burma and the family moved there. When the parents fell out, her mother came back to Orissa with the children and settled down in Khurdha. Kuntala Kumari was fifteen at that time. In 1917 she joined the Ravenshaw Girl's School in Cuttack and the next year joined the Medical School. In 1921, she got her LMP degree from the Medical School and started practicing in Cuttack.

While a student in the Medical School, she had fallen in love with her teacher Dr. Kailash Chandra Rao, a Hindu married man, sixteen years her senior. He was a cultured and principled person with nationalist leanings and became Kuntala Kumari's mentor and guide. He encouraged Kuntala Kumari to write and helped her to publish her maiden poem 'Tara Prati' (Ode to a Star) in *Utkal Sahitya*, a reputed Oriya literary journal, in June 1922.

'Tara Prati' is a long poem of 353 lines, a rather rambling piece, covering everything under the sun—or rather the stars—and deals with love, spiritual quest of man, honour, nationalism, Christ, Chaitanya, Napoleon and even Casablanca. It has a list of great women—Sita, Mira, Ahalya, Queen Victoria and Florence Nightingale; poets—Upendra, Kalidas, Hafiz, Saadi, Byron, Shelley,

Tennyson, Milton; scientists such as Newton; inventions like the wireless, steamships and electricity. However, when the poem was published, it was much appreciated by readers. When Kuntala Kumari published her second poem 'Shefali Prati' (Ode to the Shefali Flower) in the same journal a few months later, she became a well-known name in Oriya literature. She continued to write and became a prolific writer, and by the next year (1923) she had published a novel, *Bhranti*, and a collection of poems, *Anjali*.

By this time she had become a member of Blavatsky's theosophical society and started practicing theosophist Leadbeater's 'thought concentration' to know about her previous life. Kuntala Kumari writes that in one of her dreams she came to know that in her previous life she was an aristocratic French woman, who led a profligate life and had left her husband for her butler. She dies a miserable death in a slum, and as she dies, a divine voice tells her: you will be born in India and learn what chastity is. Kuntala Kumari wondered if she had been reborn a doctor because she had died in a hospital.

The other psychic event in her life occurred when, during her visit to a patient in 1924, she saw a sixteen year old boy and knew that he had been her son in a previous birth. She befriended this boy and treated him as her son for the rest of her life. She confided in him, involved him in her personal and literary life (she called him her 'mental stimulus') and wrote to him when he was away from her. This boy was Chakradhar Mohapatra, who was to write her biography in 1972 at the age of 64.

Kuntala Kumari was upset that she was not able to marry Dr Rao whom she loved. Dr Rao was a good friend who not only guided her in her writings, but also inspired her in nationalism and made her wear khadi. However, he did not consider marriage with Kuntala Kumari possible. Kuntala Kumari thought that the main hurdle to the marriage was her religion, and so converted to Brahmo religion in 1924. But that did not help in bringing about the marriage.

She continued writing at a frenetic pace. She had no doubt in her mind that her destiny was to be a writer. When she was leaving school at the age of 16, she had written a farewell poem in which she had

prayed to God that she should be given blessing to become famous as a gatherer of flowers in her mother-tongue. After the novel and the collection of poems (1923), she published regularly in literary journals and in 1924 came out with her second collection of poems, *Uchhwas*. This volume included her first poem 'Tara Prati' and had an introduction by the well-known writer Nanda Kishore Bal. That year a poem written by her was used as the inaugural song of the Utkal Sammilani, the organisation which was fighting for the amalgamation of all Oriya-speaking tracts. At this time she had also written a poem in English called 'The Neglected Land' in which she called Orissa a 'land of famine, fire, flood' and 'home of pain and misery'.

In 1925, Calcutta University published *Typical Selections from Oriya Literature* and Kuntala Kumari was, at the age of 24, the youngest writer to be included in it. She also published her second novel "*Parashmani*" at this time. As a matter of fact, by this time, Kuntala Kumari had become a legend in Orissa and was getting adulatory letters from writers praising her poetry. A ladies' organization in Puri (in 1925) gave her the title Utkal Bharati—a name by which she is still known. What is surprising is that the Mukti Mandap Pandit Sabha, an association of fundamentalist Brahmins in the Jagannath Temple at Puri gave her, a Christian turned Brahmo, a letter of appreciation praising her poetry and wishing her a long life to enrich Oriya literature. She even got letters from admirers saying that she would get the Nobel Prize. Kuntala Kumari's reaction to one such letter was: I may not get the prize, but I would like to be worthy of it.

Her personal life was, in the meantime, getting more and more complicated. Rao had been transferred to Balasore. Chakradhar's mother was not happy about Kuntala Kumari laying a claim on her son. In September 1926, Kuntala Kumari took Chakradhar with her to visit Dr. Rao at Balasore and there Rao's wife welcomed them and also made Chakradhar her son, making them all a strange family. However, when Kuntala Kumari visited Rao two months later, his wife abused her and threw her out of the house. A third visit in April 1927 went off better. Rao's wife seems to have had a change of heart and she accepted Kuntala Kumari. Kuntala Kumari was so overjoyed that she wrote to Chakradhar: "I am thrilled by this unexpected

union. This strange happening is something that occurs only in a novel. I think I will get the Nobel Prize now."

The same year Kuntala Kumari published her next novel *Na Tundi* and it became a best seller. Another novel *Raghu Arakhita* followed soon after. She also made another attempt to find a way out of the marriage impasse. In April 1928 she wrote a letter to the Secretary, Mukti Mandap Pandit Sabha seeking advice, and sent Chakradhar to Puri to find out from the learned Pundit how a Christian woman turned Brahmo could marry a Hindu, who was already married. The Pundit sent her a message that he was pondering the problem and advised her to wait for a year.

Kuntala Kumari collected her nationalist and patriotic poems under the title *Sphulinga* and sent it to the press. Her earlier poems in *Anjali* were love poems inspired by and written for her lover, and were addressed to him; the readers and critics however, had taken them to be spiritual and devotional poems and the 'thou' in the poems was interpreted to mean God (and not Dr. Rao). In the next collection *Uchhwas*, the poems were about nature—there were odes to the stars, to the *Shefali* flower and to the moon and there were poems about *kamal* and kamini and the sahakar tree. But in the present collection *Sphulinga*, the poems were on the subject of patriotism and nationalism. Like millions of her generation, she had been inspired by Gandhi and had once even dabbled with the idea of going to Sabarmati Ashram and living there.

'Shefali Prati' is Kuntala Kumari's best known poem and finds a place in every anthology. However, the most quoted lines from Kuntala Kumari are from a poem in *Sphulinga*. It begins:

Listen to me, my brother,
Man is not born
To die in grief
Or drown in sorrow....

The poem ends with these lines:

You are children
Of an eternal radiance;
For you, there is no death.

Another important poem in this collection was "Nari Shakti",

which was partly in reply to Katherine Mayo's infamous *Mother India*. Kuntala Kumari wrote:

Do not circulate stories
Of oppression of women in India.
Let not foreigners
Proudly propagate
The miseries of Indian women.

While Kuntala Kumari's literary fame was spreading far and wide, her personal life was in the doldrums, for she was yet to find a way to marry the man she loved. At this time she came across a news item in the daily Samaj newspaper that one Vachaspati Shastri of Delhi was working for the emancipation of helpless women and was seeking the assistance of social workers in Orissa. Helpless and desperate as she was, Kuntala Kumari wrote to this person about her problem and there was an exchange of letters. After a few letters, the gentleman arrived in person at Kuntala Kumari's door one fine morning in May 1928, and matters moved very fast then on.

This self-styled Dr. K.P. Brahmachari Vachaspati Shastri claimed to be a religious preacher and globe-trotter (he even claimed that he had fought in the Boer War in Africa). But he was, in reality, a small time crook and confidence man from Kendrapada in Orissa, who had worked as a compounder for some time before joining the Arya Samaj. It was even suspected that he was trafficking in women. However, Kuntala Kumari, who was susceptible to theosophical hallucinations found in this man her god and saviour and saw him as the real Krishna and an incarnation of Vishnu. She treated him as such as long as he stayed in Cuttack.

The literary fall-out of this meeting was that in a short period Kuntala Kumari wrote a series of poems for his God incarnate, which were later (1930) published as Radha-Krishna love poems under the title *Prema Chintamani*. Readers compared these poems to the mediaeval Bhakti poetry of Orissa and Pandit Godavarish Mishra even did an English translation of the book.

Brahmachari now had Kuntala Kumari under his wings and undertook the responsibility of getting her married to Rao. He also convinced her that the son to be born from her womb was going to be a messiah. He decided that they would take Rao to Delhi where the

marriage would take place. Kuntala Kumari therefore wound up her affairs in Cuttack and with Brahmachari and Chakradhar (her 'son' and future biographer) went to Ghatshila, where Rao was then posted. Rao, however, refused to go to Delhi under the plea that he had been unable to get leave, but promised to join them there later. On July 2, 1928 Kuntala Kumari and Brahmachari left for Delhi; she had not imagined that she was leaving Orissa for good and that she would be spending the rest of her life in Delhi.

When Rao did not come to Delhi, Kuntala Kumari sent Brahmachari to Ghatshila again, but he could not persuade Rao. In the meantime, she wrote to Chakradhar that her Arya Samaj hosts were pressurising her (Chakradhar slyly comments that the lady was only too willing) to get married to someone else. She was finally converted to Arya Samaj on the 24th July 1928, and ten days later, her marriage was performed according to Vedic Hindu rites. When Rao learnt about it, he wrote to Chakradhar: "When you hear this, you will go deaf, your eyes will lose sight and your mind will blow—your mother has married Brahmachari." Kuntala Kumari, however, wrote to Chakradhar that because of her penance of a thousand years, she got the real Srikrishna as her husband, like she had written in *Prema Chintamani*. Her ecstasy was, however, to be short-lived.

Kuntala Kumari resumed her medical profession in Delhi and soon had a roaring practice. She continued to write and published "Ahwan" (1930), a poem of patriotic and nationalistic fervour. The book was proscribed, adding to her stature. She took part in social and literary activities in Delhi, made friends with writers like Jainendra Kumar and established a literary organization—Bharati Tapovan. She involved herself in nationalist activities and when Bhagat Singh was hanged (1931) she wrote a poem in English and circulated it in the Karachi session of the Congress. She edited some short-lived Hindi and English journals, addressed meetings, participated in Arya Samaj and women's activities and wrote a series of fiery letters from Delhi which were published in Oriya journals to great acclaim. She tried her hand at Hindi poetry and published a collection of poems in Hindi called *Varnmala*. She was much feted and felicitated as a great writer both in Delhi and in Orissa.

However, the fact of the matter is that she had lost her voice and her poetic muse was dead by 1930. Brahmachari, her husband, was least interested in literature and wanted Kuntala Kumari to devote all her time to making money. As she wrote in a letter to Chakradhar: "Brahmachari is a businessman ... who would not put me to anything unless there was money in it." The clinic she had started under the title Bharati Medical Hall: Chemists and Druggists had, by 1931, become Kuntala and Brahmachari (India) Ltd, Bankers, Exporters and Importers, Manufacturers' Representatives and Distributing Agents, Manufacturers of Drugs, Medicines and Chemical Products. She had also given birth to two daughters (in 1929 and 1932). Brahmachari who wanted to become a millionaire entered into other ventures, got into litigation and lost heavily. He started misbehaving with Kuntala Kumari even before visitors and expected her to observe some purdah. Her family life became one long misery. However she produced two nondescript books: *Odianka Kandana* (Lamentation of Oriyas) and *Gadajat Krushak* (Farmers of the Princely States) during this period.

In March 1937 she gave birth to a son and thought that the great prophecy was going to be fulfilled, but the child died after 45 days. She lost her health, became depressed and lost her balance of mind. She recovered when she carried again and in June 1938 she wrote a letter to Chakradhar giving him the good news. It was her last letter to him and in this letter she had asked him to write her biography.

On 23rd August at 5 p.m. her labour pains started. She was convinced that she was this time going to give birth to the future messiah. She had wanted the super child to be born in secrecy and so did not go to a hospital; instead she instructed Brahmachari what to do. At 7 p.m. she gave birth to a child. The nurse told her that it was a boy. Kuntala Kumari started laughing in joy and then fainted. Brahmachari gave her an injection. (Chakradhar says, in haste and carelessly), and Kuntala Kumari was dead. She was only 37.

Thus ended an eventful and fiery life at a young age. Kuntala Kumari's creative life was very short—hardly ten years. But during these years she had written abundantly and exuberantly. Writer Godavarish Mohapatra had advised her not to shine as a bright star, but to flash as a comet. Kuntala Kumari had done exactly that.

ORISSAN ART

1

Decline and Revival of an Art

(From *Puri Paintings*, 1982)

While the Chitrakaras elsewhere in Orissa depended on *seva* work for their livelihood, the Chitrakaras of Puri had come to depend more and more on the sale of *jatri pati.* There was a heavy demand for *jatri pati* and the Chitrakaras of Raghurajpur, Dandasahi and Puri had their hands full executing the orders.

Till the middle of the 19th century, there were no markets in Puri, but "a common fair was daily held in front of the Singdurwazah", the main gate of the Jagannatha temple. As a matter of fact, artifacts connected with the temple, including pata paintings of deities, used to be sold in two places, in the Bedha-mahal inside the temple premises and in the Chakada-mahal just outside the main gate, near the Aruna pillar. In these two shopping areas, there were shops for selling different items and *patas* were sold in a shop known as Chitrapati-mahal. The right to use the Chitrapati-mahal used to be auctioned out to the highest bidder by the temple authorities. The bid was normally taken by a professional trader who would buy *patas* from the Chitrakaras and sell these at a profit. Besides these two places, there was also stray selling of *pata* by the Chitrakaras themselves after taking permission from the Temple Manager's office. The following interesting case of 1905 shows the eagerness of the Chitrakaras to get such permission.

The Chitrakara *hakims* had made an application to the Temple Manager for action against ten Chitrakaras for having violated their orders in a caste matter. Since no decision was taken on this application the plaintiffs made the following plea before the Temple Manager: "Since the defendants have not appeared in spite of notice and are treating the Raja Sarkar with scant respect, we are not confident of performing the *seva* of the Gods as also of doing the Ratha work. Even before this complaint is decided we have to complete the *anasara pati* as also other important work connected with the Ratha. To enable us to do so, we may be given the right to sell paintings of Sri Jiu on the twenty-two steps of the temple and those who are selling paintings on the *bada-danda* may be stopped from doing so."

In spite of their own efforts to sell *jatri pati* directly to pilgrims, the Chitrakaras had to depend mainly on the agency of the Chitrapati mahal for sale of their paintings. For years, one Ananda Mohanty was the lease holder of the mahal and was the chief middleman-buyer of *jatri pati* from the Chitrakaras of Raghurajpur, Dandasahi and Puri. From time to time he would go to Raghurajpur with a cartload of paddy and rice and collect paintings in exchange. Those in urgent need of grains would sell their paintings to him very cheap. He would also give a loan when a Chitrakara was in need, against a bond to supply so many hundred paintings, for cheap *jatri pati* were being bought from Chitrakaras in lots of hundreds.

Ananda Mohanty had started his business sometime toward the end of the last century and within a few years had become prosperous enough to own several shops and buildings in Puri, which he rented out. He was also a money-lender. His many transactions as trader, house owner and money-lender led him to file many suits for the recovery of money, and he was a familiar figure in the Puri Civil Court. Money had brought him respectability too. Referred to as Ananda Mohanty son of Krista Mohanty caste Golla (a mixed low caste) of Baseli Sahi, Puri Town in the Court records of 1904-05, he had by 1910-11 become Mahajan Ananda Chandra Mohanty caste Kayastha-karana (a higher caste).

By this time, the poor Chitrakaras had become poorer and Ananda Mohanty even owned some houses in Raghurajpur, having acquired them in court cases for recovery of loans that were not repaid to him. So impoverished were some Chitrakaras that when in 1910 Mohanty filed a suit against Shama Maharana of Raghurajpur and obtained an order for attachment of moveable property of the defendant, the order could not be carried out because Shama Maharana had no belongings in his house. The court records during the period show several cases filed by Ananda Mohanty against Chitrakaras (among others) for recovery of money due on account of bond, house rent, note of hand and mortgage.

The Chitrakaras had resigned themselves to their fate and bore their sufferings silently till Michhu Misra, a social worker of Puri suggested to them that they should make their own arrangement for selling *jatri pati* through a cooperative. When the Chitrakaras were busy organising a cooperative, Ananda Mohanty did two things. One was to get in touch with printers in Calcutta to find out if they could print pictures of Jagannath in colour. Years earlier, some ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art had set up an art studio in Calcutta to turn out lithographic pictures, but the colouring had to be done by hand and the prices were as a result rather high. Some English chromolithographer had taken advantage of this and had made exact copies of the Calcutta Art Studio pictures in colours and had sent a large consignment for sale in India at about one-tenth the price; but the sale of these chromolithographs had been stopped subsequently. By the early years of this century, however, Calcutta had its own press for chromolithograph printing. Ananda Mohanty got a *thiabadhia* painting done through Kelu Maharana of Dandasahi and arranged with the art studio in Calcutta to reproduce it in colour.

The other thing Ananda Mohanty did was to give cash advances to Chitrakaras for supply of heavy orders of *jatri pati*. The Chitrakaras did not have such large stocks of *jatri pati* with them for immediate supply and so wrote out notes stating that they owed so many hundred to Mohanty. It did not take Ananda Mohanty long to modify these notes to show that the Chitrakaras owed him so many hundred

rupees and file suits for recovery of the money. The Chitrakaras now had to forget about the cooperative and get busy fighting the cases. In the meantime chromolithographs arrived in large quantities in the Puri market, and because of the cheap price they became quite popular with the pilgrims. The Chitrakaras had lost their source of livelihood, and by the time the court cases were decided, had lost their homesteads too to Ananda Mohanty.

Thrown out of their caste profession and forced to live in their own houses as tenants of persons who had bought them in the court cases, the Chitrakaras of Raghurajpur and Dandasahi had to look for other employment. Many of them became wage earners in betel-leaf gardens, carrying water and headloads of earth. Some became masons and still others became agricultural labourers. Youngsters joined Mohan Goswamy's Opera Party, which specialised in Krishna-lila performances. Except for ritual work on doors and walls on a few days of the year, painting was forgotten by the Chitrakaras, and the brushes and colours were put away.

It was to take more than a generation before there would be a revival of the art. And it took a chance meeting between the grandson of Kelu Maharana, who had done the original for the chromolithograph, and a foreigner to make this possible.

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) is a private, voluntary organisation of Quakers founded in 1917. In 1951 the AFSC decided to undertake village improvement projects in India, and when its representatives met Pandit Nehru, he advised them to go round the country and select suitable areas for themselves. After visiting ten states AFSC finally selected two places, of which Barpali in Sambalpur District, Orissa, was one. The AFSC teams soon arrived and the team for Barpali included Philip Zealey, who was to be the Director of the service from 1952 to 1954. He was accompanied by his wife Halina and their two small children. The Western technicians for Barpali had to spend several preliminary months in Puri, assembling staff and equipment and awaiting the provision of housing at Barpali. They also set to work studying the Oriya language. When the team, including Philip, left for Barpali Halina stayed

behind with the children and continued her Oriya lessons in the Baptist Mission bungalow on the Puri sea beach where she lived.

Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose, noted anthropologist and author of *Canons of Orissan Architecture* was a consultant to the AFSC, Orissa project. While on a visit to Puri in June 1952, he introduced the Western group to two families of Pathurias (stone carvers). Fascinated by what she saw, Halina often went back to Pathuria Sahi to watch them at work. Panu Maharana, grandson of Kelu Maharana of Dandasahi, was at this time an impoverished Chitrakara trying to eke out a living by selling a few paintings to pilgrims and tourists on the Puri sea beach. One evening, Halina saw Panu peddling his paintings and called him inside the bungalow. What she saw opened her eyes to yet another facet of Orissan art, viz. *pata* paintings.

Soon thereafter she accompanied Panu to Dandasahi where she saw the painter and his two middle-aged younger brothers at work, assisted by their wives and Panu's children. From time to time Panu also came to Puri with his paintings to visit Halina, for she was building up a small collection of the Hindu Gods and would buy a few paintings every month. Halina took her friends to Dandasahi, and they discovered to their delight that the Chitrakaras had fine works on many subjects in their houses. When the Chitrakaras realised the awakened interest in their work, the new paintings they made became more and more interesting and after continuous insistence on quality, more and more fine in execution. Quite a number of paintings were sold to the people who were brought to the village. Within a few months the three brothers had sold most of their accumulated stocks and all the members of the family had been very busy. The prestige of the family had risen and a sense of creative joy and pride of work now prevailed in the houses of the Chitrakara brothers. Every visit of Halina was a real event in Panu's family especially if she brought her young daughter with her. Halina's house in Puri was now open to Panu and his brothers who often came for advice, for translations and for an advance on orders if they were in need. Yet they never accepted any food or drink, however hungry or thirsty (for she was a

Christian), but always provided Halina and her friends with fresh tender coconut water to drink during their visits to Dandasahi.

Halina found that the main problem of the Chitrakaras was marketing. There were only a few shops in Puri that occasionally bought work from their family, often at ridiculously low prices, at times when the painters were without rice. She, therefore, tried to find more permanent outlets for their work without the intervention of middlemen who had shamelessly exploited them in the past. She got in touch with the Bengal Home Industries Association, which started taking some paintings for sale in Calcutta, and the Indian Institute of Art in Industry, which had shown Orissan *pata* paintings in their exhibition. She also investigated the possibility of having show cases in the BNR Hotel in Puri and at the Raghunandan Library and a temporary stand on the *bada-danda*. In March 1953 she sent a detailed report to the AFSC headquarters narrating her experience, and Philadelphia was quick to respond. AFSC approved the use of Rs. 500 from the Project funds for assisting the artists to find a market, and also sent a copy of her note to W. Norman Brown of the South Asia Regional Studies of the University of Pennsylvania. Norman Brown showed the note to Dr Stella Kramrisch, who having been well acquainted with paintings from Orissa was quite impressed and offered to get the American Museums interested in buying these paintings.

In the meantime, Halina was busy trying to find new markets for the paintings. She got the Chitrakaras to do paintings on wall plaques, small pots, jars, vases and even on small cards for use as Christmas and New Year Greeting cards. She gave Mrs. B.K. Nehru, the wife of the Indian Ambassador to the U.S.A., samples to take to New York with a view to sales promotion there. She wrote to the Mahant of Emar Matha for a show case and sales room in the Raghunandan Library and got a favourable response. She succeeded in marketing paintings in Calcutta through the Bengal Home Industries Association.

On August 10, 1953 Philip and Halina were invited to meet the Governor of Orissa, who was spending a few days in Puri. They took

along some of the latest paintings and sculptures with them and the Governor bought two paintings he liked. At his instance they met Naba Krishna Choudhury, the Chief Minister of Orissa, on August 14 with a similar collection. The Chief Minister and the Minister of Industries requested them to leave the whole lot with them for a day or so in order that the samples might be shown to the members of the Cabinet, who were meeting that afternoon. The Chief Minister also requested them to give him a memorandum on the subject of market promotion for Orissan artistic crafts. The Cabinet of Choudhury was going through a crisis and had an eight-hour session that day, but the members did find some time to see the painting collection and to buy a few pieces.

On August 16, a Memorandum was given to the Chief Minister for the setting up of a small Artistic Crafts Marketing Organisation with the following objectives:

(a) To stimulate a wider interest and controlled marketing of craft products within Orissa.

(b) To establish and consolidate markets in other parts of India and abroad.

(c) To resuscitate existing craft production, to encourage adaptation to the needs of the modern market and to ensure the maintenance of high standards in quality.

(d) To encourage the employment of craftsmen in the decoration and fittings of public buildings.

(e) To assist craftsmen in the procurement of raw materials, of tools and equipment.

The Memorandum was duly circulated among the Members of the Cabinet and senior officials, and the Ministers were soon talking about Orissan art "discovered by American Friends". However, there was no machinery in the Government to take any concrete steps. The Cottage Industries Board, which had been set up under the chairmanship of the Chief Minister, had not even had its first meeting yet.

Halina, however, continued her work, and marketing prospects improved. Large orders started coming in from Calcutta, Delhi and

Bombay and the Dandasahi Chitrakaras had their hands full. All children "including young girls" were at work helping the Chitrakaras. The steady flow of well-paid orders led not only to an improved feeling of self dignity but also to better clothes and appearance. The Chitrakaras had lost their miserable hounded look and aggressive or passive hostile attitude. The same men who one year earlier did not dare to enter the Baptist Mission bungalow were behaving with noticeable self assurance, pride and confidence.

Though working closely with the Chitrakara community, Halina had not yet heard of Raghurajpur, for the Dandasahi Chitrakaras, out of jealous rivalry, would not mention to her their brethren in that village. She came to know of Raghurajpur from a shopkeeper in Chandanpur and visited the village. She did not consider the Chitrakaras there good craftsmen but hoped that with employment and better food they would develop skill and interest. Only five old men were doing good paintings and a few others were promising. But Halina knew that the youth who had deserted the profession would come back to learn the skill from their fathers if painting offered them a better prospect. She encouraged young boys of eight to ten years to paint and bought their paintings, and thereby trained a number of boys. She also hit upon a plan to get the Chitrakaras interested: She announced prizes of Rs. 10 for the three best paintings and Rs. 2 for the other entries.

The competition was held in September 1953 and the award winners were:

Agadhu Maharana (Raghurajpur)	- First
Lakshman Maharana (Raghurajpur)	- Second
Guna Maharana (Dandasahi)	- Third

The fact, however, was that the first and second award-winning paintings had in reality been painted not by the winners but by Panu Maharana of Dandasahi and Dama Maharana of Puri respectively. Everything would have gone on all right but for a snide remark by a Dandasahi Chitrakara: "who will draw water to the betel-leaf gardens if the Raghurjpur people took to painting?"

The insulted and infuriated Chitrakaras of Raghurajpur had a meeting that evening and decided to take the problem to Jagannath Mahapatra, who, at that time only thirty-four, was well respected in the Chitrakara community. Though he was a good painter, he was now working as a mason in the day and as a member of Mohan Goswamy's Opera Party in the night. When the Chitrakara delegation met him that evening in Puri, Jagannath Mahapatra was rehearsing for that night's show. He listened to them and returned to Raghurajpur next morning to take out from an old trunk his brushes and paints which had been gathering dust over the yeas. In the course of time he was to become the doyen of Chitrakaras and Raghurajpur the leading painters' village.

The Orissa Cottage Industries Board had its first meeting on October 4, 1953 and Halina Zealey was co-opted as one of its members. The Board approved Halina's proposal to set up an Emporium. She now started organising an exhibition in Puri, and this was held in November 1953. The exhibition was put together by the craftsmen themselves and six Chitrakara families from Dandasahi, twenty families of Raghurajpur and five families of Puri participated in it. Although a middleman had tried to sabotage the exhibition by organising a parallel exhibition five days earlier, he could call upon the support of only one Chitrakara. The exhibition was a great success and was of great encouragement to the Chitrakaras. In the meantime Dr Kramrisch had been able to sell twenty-two of the twenty-five paintings taken by Mrs. Nehru and she had also booked orders for 122 more.

Halina was next to prepare for two other exhibitions to be held in January 1954: the Institute of Art in Industry Exhibition in Calcutta and the Republic Day Exhibition in Delhi. She had to pay advances to the Chitrakaras and frantically requested from Philadelphia a revolving fund of Rs. 3,000. On November 24, she received a cable: "approve three thousand rupees revolving fund congratulations on successful exhibition."

The exhibition went off well. Soon an Arts and Crafts Centre was also started in Puri by the Government of Orissa and Halina was put

in charge. She could now see with pleasure and satisfaction things taking shape and the Chitrakaras returning to their profession slowly but surely.

Early in 1954, Philip Zealey was ordered to transfer to Delhi as AFSC's liaison representative. Before she handed over charge of the Centre and left Orissa, Halina wanted to have one last exhibition to present the latest works of the Chitrakaras to the public. The exhibition was held in the Senate Hall of Utkal University in Cuttack. A prize was announced for the best painting. This time there was no wangle and a painting of Ganesa was adjudged the best. The Chitrakara was Jagannath Mahapatra.

Halina laid down her office in the Arts and Crafts Centre, Puri on March 31, 1954. When the AFSC made their report to the International Cooperation Administration of the USA in 1956, they made a brief mention of the work done in Puri for the crafts and cottage industries. What was not mentioned and what the Committee did not know at that time was the fact that Halina Zealey had achieved the impossible. She had brought back a whole community of Chitrakaras to a profession which was traditionally their own but which they had abandoned under compelling circumstances. She had achieved this single-handed, with a meagre grant of Rs. 3,500, her halting Oriya and an infinite love for the Puri paintings and their makers.

2

Palm-Leaf Art
(From *Chitra-Pothi*, 1985)

Orissan miniature art can be divided into two main categories, the *pata* and the palm-leaf. *Pata* is the traditional style of Orissan painting which developed in close association with various rituals in the Jagannath temple in Puri. It flourished (and still does) as a hieratic art from, depicting only religious subjects. Painted with indigenous pigments on primed pieces of cloth, *pata* paintings depicted gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon and stories from the Indian mythology. The painters of these pictures were all from the Chitrakar caste, which belonged to the lowly *shudra* order of the society. They painted *patas* as a caste calling and supplied them to temples and monasteries for ritual use on ceremonial occasions. They also sold paintings to pilgrims as religious mementos and to patrons like princes and landlords as art objects. Painted by unlettered village craftsmen, these paintings with their bright colour scheme looked folksy but cannot perhaps be categorized as folk paintings since they followed strict and sophisticated iconographic formulae and artistic discipline which gave the paintings a Shastric or canonical character. There is, in these paintings, no artistic exuberance or indulgence so characteristic of folk art. The Chitrakar children learnt their craft the hard way, through rigorous training as apprentices to master craftsmen and by following the family sketch book as a manual for

their craft. *Pata* is a living art form of Orissa which is still practiced by professional painters as a caste profession.

Palm-leaf art, on the other hand, developed as a secular art form. Though there are various uses of palm-leaf writing for ritual purposes, there is no ritual or religious use of illustrations on palm-leaf. Unlike the *pata* painters, palm-leaf artists came from various strata of the Orissan society and we have high-caste Brahmins to lowly oilmen as illustrators of pothis. Unlike the Chitrakars again, they were self-trained and though each artist worked independently, a distinct palm-leaf style had evolved over the years which they all followed.

It is quite possible that palm-leaf art developed simultaneously with the use of palm-leaf as writing material. The sculptors who carved the beautiful images in the temples of Orissa might have used palm-leaf to make initial sketches before transferring them onto stone. Though the bulk of palm-leaf illustrations accompanied literary texts, it is not unusual to find independent pictures unrelated to any text. These pictures are to be found on stitched leaves, not on single leaves. The scribes of palm-leaf documents sometimes tried to adorn the drab text of the legal deed with embellishments and pictures. In a land grant given in 1708 AD the palm-leaf document has the picture of a peacock. The illustration in this instance is rather odd since the grantor was giving the piece of land to the grantee for having killed a man, who was inimical to the former! Another embellishment frequently used on palm-leaf documents was the authentication of signatures by the picture of a lotus, wheel or even a stylus.

Gita Govinda, one of the oldest and most popular writings from Orissa, could possibly be the first text to be illuminated on palm-leaf. However, it has not been possible to date any chitra-pothi to a period earlier than the later part of the 17th century, though we have unillustrated palm-leaf manuscripts of earlier periods. The availability of palm-leaf illustrations of even this antiquity is, however, quite significant considering the fact that no *pata* paintings of more than two hundred years old has been authoritatively dated so far. It is quite likely that popular Oriya texts of the fifteenth and the

sixteenth centuries like *Mahabharat* and *Bhagavata* were being illustrated though no copies of these manuscripts have survived. Palm-leaf art appears to have reached its zenith during the age of Upendra Bhanja and continued upto the end of the nineteenth century and most of the extant chitra-pothis would clearly belong to this period.

Though *pata* was the prevalent from of Orissa when *chitra-pothi* art came to its own, the latter had to develop its own style due to the nature of the carrier used for the pictures. Palm-leaf art was basically a linear drawing without any scope for modeling either by use of colour or through lines of varying thickness. Besides, palm-leaf art may have imbibed ideas from other art forms like the western Indian miniatures with which Orissan illustrations are often compared. Despite many similarities which palm-leaf art of Orissa has with other art styles, it has its own individual characteristics which place it apart as a distinct style. These characteristics include drawing, linear forms of lyrical sensitiveness, typical treatment of landscape and architectural settings, and special features of the faces and the figures. Stella Kramrisch referred to many of these characteristics in her article on the illustrated *Amarushataka* from Orissa.

In the *Amarushataka* manuscript, the figures invariably have their large heads shown in profile; they are sharply turned sideways while the body is in three-quarter profile or front view; the hips and legs again in profile. This is typical also of Indian illustrations, of which examples have survived from the 12th century onwards in western India, the only difference being that in the western Indian illustrations part of the averted half of the faces (in the earlier illuminations) and in any case its large but little foreshortened eye, are outlined against the background. Here as well as there, limbs move freely within the space built up by the body and its terms. The figure has its base on a couch on which it sits or reclines, or on its own feet when standing. Neither of them are reduced to or laid into a mere line. Rounded volume is suggested by the outline whereas its contents are reduced to that of a mottled surface; this is typical of eastern and western Indian illumination. The western variety by the 17th century

is swept over by Moghul currents while in the east the local tradition is still strong as in *Amarushataka* manuscript. There it has its antecedents in sculpture of which it appears as a one-sided version.

Plam-leaf illustrations of Orissa drew many elements from from Orissan sculpture (combined profile and front view, pillared arches) as also from traditional *pata* paintings (facial features, figure composition). A characteristic feature of palm-leaf illustration is the use of scalloped arches enclosing the figures whether in the interior or the exterior scenes.The figures are outlined against a blank ground and the pictures are 'delimited in every scene, like the space of a window or an open door, by an enclosed frame, with pillars for its sides or it is flung in curves around the opening'.

The faces and figures were sought to be drawn to ideal proportions, though in the hands of a bad artist, they looked clumsy and ugly in some *chitra-pothis.* The men and women in the pictures generally looked alike and the characters had to be distinguished by the design on their dresses. The captions also helped for they labeled each character by name. Female figures were distinguished by the large nose-ring, which was a typical feature of palm-leaf drawings of women. In the hands of outstanding artists, the pictures became works of art rather than mere illustrations and a good artist could draw pictures of children and old persons and managed to infuse feeling and emotion in the otherwise immobile faces of the characters.

It may be mentioned that though the faces were normally drawn with a profile view as in the case of *pata* and other schools of mediaeval painting, the palm-leaf artist, unlike the Chitrakar, sometimes tried a frontal view. The result was almost always disappointing, if not outright disastrous.

As regards outside influences, it should not be forgotten that the *chitra-pothi* art developed at a time when both the western and eastern palm-leaf painting styles had ceased to exist for quite sometime and Mughal painting had established itself. Orissa with its centres of pilgrimage (especially Puri) and patronage of art (through princely courts) must have attracted paintings and painters from other parts of India and the Orissan artist exposed to outside influences. In many

pothi illustrations one finds characters, even mythological ones, in Mughal and Rajasthani dress. It must also be through exposure to other contemporary painting styles that palm-leaf art abandoned the tradition (as in *pata*) of portraying each figure in full visibility and not allowing one figure to encroach into the ground of another.

The artist had to work under severe limitations. The palm-leaf format was oblong and narrow. Except in the case of some *Shilpa Shastra* manuscripts where the leaves have been used vertically for the pictures, the horizontal format was invariably used by the artist because the text too was written along the length of the leaf. The stylus produced fine lines of uniform thickness. It was not possible to do an initial sketch for once a line had been drawn with a stylus, it was not possible to obliterate or modify it. Despite these constraints the artist managed to draw not only full standing human figures (a bust was done only if it was to represent a portrait or when the head was shown through a window), but indoor and outdoor scenes of great complexity and dexterous composition. There are well executed procession and battle scenes on single palm-leaf sheets testifying to the ingenuity of the artist.

Most art forms involve an initial sketch which can be worked over and obliterated while finishing the work. Even the sculptors did a sketch on stone before proceeding to carve out the sculpture. However, for the palm-leaf artist, even the first sketch was an incision on the leaf which could not be obliterated. He had either to abandon the leaf or make do with corrections by overwriting. In a *Vaidehisha Vilasa* manuscript, the artist made a mistake in drawing the design for a chakra (wheel) bandha and when he realized it, did another picture near it, allowing the defective one to remain with a caption covering part of it. In a *Kripasindhu Janana* manuscript, the artist started sketching a figure, but when he got it wrong, covered up his mistake by finishing the half-done sketch into a creeper!

Besides lines and curves, the artist used hatching, but only for embellishment and for creating designs on the dress and not for shading. The pictures were pure line work without any efforts at giving them volume through shading or colour. For drawing thicker

lines, the artist had to make several closely incised lines with the stylus. When he needed a patch of black to represent hair or water, he managed with close cross-hatching. It is interesting to note that though the artist used a ruler to make straight lines, he did circles with a free hand instead of using a compass. (The compass has been used to draw circles in some later pothis).

Though palm-leaf art normally meant inked etchings, colour was sometimes used in the illustrations. In some *chitra-pothis* a flat colour, usually red, has been applied as a ground on the unsketched areas of the illustrated portion of the leaf, as in a traditional Orissan *pata* painting. One comes across such colouring in Rama Krishna Das's manuscripts. A coloured line was sometimes drawn alomg the incised line to reinforce and highlight it, as in many Sarathi Madala Patnaik manuscripts. In some other cases, colour (yellow, blue, red) has been used on the face and body and on dress and ornaments. However, such use of colour has tended to blur and obliterate the lines, thereby making the pictures look weak and unfinished. Application of colour on palm-leaf etchings thus followed a technique quite different from *pata,* in which fine black line work was done after colour had been applied to the body, dress, ornaments etc. in the painting. In many instances, the colour work on the palm-leaf was done at a much later date than the original incision. The painted palm-leaf can be treated as an aberration and it is only in a rare case that application of colour has added to the beauty of the original incised picture.

Palm-leaf art had developed as a complement to palm-leaf manuscript writing and it withered when printing presses replaced the scribe. Oriya literature, which sustained the writing of pothis, entered a new age towards the later part of the nineteenth century. Ornate poetry of Upendra and his followers had given way to 'modern' lyrical poetry, inspired by English literature. Oriya society was also undergoing a transformation with the growth of communication and education facilities. There was a new generation which preferred to read modern literature from printed books rather than struggle over *kavya* poetry from palm-leaf manuscripts. The last of the pothis (including illustrated ones) were done during the early years of this

century. The only text which continued to be written and illustrated on palm-leaf beyond this period was the *Chausathi Rati-Bandha.* These chitra-pothis were done in large numbers with poor and banal workmanship and were pale reminders of the golden age of *chitra-pothi* which was over. The latest datable *chitra-pothi* in a museum collection is a *Rati-bandha.* The manuscript in the National Museum collection was done in November 1942 for a patron. Its scribe and illustrator was Shatrughana Nayak, who now teaches palm-leaf art in the government handicrafts school in Orissa.

Speeches and Interviews

1

Saraswati Samman (2006) Acceptance Speech

I am very happy to be here with you all today and am honoured by your presence. Writers and readers rarely meet, and any occasion that brings them together is always a welcome moment.

Many writers have a grievance about the indifference of readers and critics to their work. My own experience, however, has been quite different. I have always had kindness and love showered on me not only by readers, friends and acquaintances, but even by virtual strangers; so much so that I often wonder if I deserve it. The little I have written does not measure up to what I have received. I have always felt that I should have done more to make myself worthy of what people have given me so willingly.

On an occasion like this a writer is expected to talk on the subject of literature and spell out his literary credo and testament. Unfortunately, besides doing my little bit of creative writing I have found no interest in literary theories and discourses. Whatever I wanted to say I have tried to say in my poems. I have no other statements to make or principles to enunciate.

I might, however, talk about my own deficiencies and doubts as a writer. I have done my writing with all seriousness but am afraid I have not been able to give it the whole of my life, time and devotion it deserved. It is possible for full time, professional writers to do so, but

for part time Sunday writers like me, we have always found some excuse not to write—like the bad weather, other important work like paying bills, and worst of all, no mood!

There has also been the nagging doubt in mind about the very purpose of writing and the readership of one's work. The readership of Oriya books is very small and for poetry it is smaller still. But I have consoled myself that a small readership gives the writer the freedom to write in the way he would like to; and have continued to write.

A question has also arisen in my mind if one could write poetry after Gujarat. And I have solved it in my own way. After Gujarat, I have rationalised, poetry can be written about Gujarat itself to affirm the truth that there is no Ayodhya outside poet Valmiki's epic imagination.

I have also wondered about the poet's role in society. Everybody expects the writer to reform society through his writing. This surely is too great a burden for the writer to carry. When there is all around us poverty and exploitation, corruption and lawlessness, disease and discontent, murder and mayhem, what can the poet possibly do? The answer for me is that he must do the only thing he is capable of doing: write about them for the world to see the truth.

We who write in Indian languages face another problem. As globalization is set to colonise our society the English language is threatening to swamp and dislodge our languages. We can protect and save our languages only by writing in them and creating a body of good literature. I hope to contribute my little bit to this effort as long as I can.

I must admit that I have not found writing easy. Some poets talk of a divine force dictating poems to them which they merely write down. I have had no such luck. Some others claim that poetry comes to them. If I knew where poetry came from, I would like to go there. As for me, I find writing a difficult and burdensome task; I would perhaps not be writing at all but for the satisfaction and pleasure I get after a piece is completed.

This daunting task of writing may be the reason why I have not been able to write more than what I have done. I have reassured

myself that I have at least tried to live a full life outside my writing. If only I had an inkling that it would be a loss to literature if I did not write, then I would have tried to write more at the cost of my other lives. But I never had that illusion or conceit.

This occasion makes me feel humble and all the more aware of my limitations and inadequacies. It makes me wish I had written more, given words to the many ideas floating in my mind and completed half-written pieces. And makes me wish I were younger to do all that.

I am, perhaps, expected to speak about the book which has got the *samman*. If it had been a work of fiction I could tell the story in brief. But a poem's theme cannot be narrated or explained, since in a poem how it is said is as important as what is said. All that I may do is read one of the poems, "The Meaning of Poetry", from the collection. I hope at least some of you will take the trouble of reading the book some time.

With these words I accept the *samman* with all humility and dedicate it to Oriya poets of the past who have inspired me, my contemporaries who have sustained me and, above all, to younger poets who are poised to take Oriya poetry to new directions.

Thank you.

(The poems "The Meaning of Poetry" and "After Gujarat" appear elsewhere in this volume.)

2

Authorspeak

Let me admit, at the very outset that I do not feel very comfortable facing an audience, especially when I am expected to speak about myself.

I believe that a creative writer does not have to speak, since all that he has to say he must say in his writings. Writers—and for that matter, painters and dancers—do not need to speak in public since they have chosen a profession in which they have to communicate without speech.

Of course, I have given poetry readings, but I am not sure if I have been able to reach out to the audience. I have seen and heard any number of poets murdering some of their best poems through bad reading. Shakespeare had anticipated this when he wrote: "I pray you mar no more of my verses with reading them ill-favouredly".

There is also another reason why a poet should be read rather than seen and heard. He should not only not speak, he should not be seen either. From reading a poet's works, readers have a mental image of how the poet would be like in real life. But very often, the writer does not quite live up to that image. When the firebrand poet, who has penned some of the most inflammatory and subversive lines, appears before his charmed readers, they are disappointed to see an undersized sickly old man. And when he fumbles over his poem in a squeaky voice, the audience start having doubts if this is the same fellow who wrote the inspiring lines.

The situation is even more pathetic when it comes to love poetry, because the poet rarely lives up to the Byronic image of Apollo carved in alabaster and illuminated from within! That is perhaps the reason why most writers use their twenty year old photographs, taken from a flattering angle, on the dust jackets of their books.

I also believe that to understand a writer's work, it is not necessary to know about his life. As Tagore very succinctly put it, you won't find the poet in his life story. He had made this observation while reviewing a biography of Tennyson, and had concluded by saying: what the poet has gifted to the people is his poetry, not his life; from Tennyson's poems we know how great he is; his life story makes him so much smaller.

Having said that, let me come to my life since in this programme a writer is supposed to talk about himself also. Amrita Pritam had once said that her life story could be written on the back of a stamp. I may say that my life could be written on the head of a pin. Let me, however, add that in mediaeval Europe, theologians used to have endless debates as to exactly how many angels could dance on top of a pin! Now for my brief life story: I was born in an Orissa village, grew up and did my school and college in the small town of Cuttack. I went to Allahabad for my post-graduate studies, and after my Master's there I served as a lecturer in Allahabad University for a year. I then joined the Indian Administrative Service. I did various odd jobs in Orissa and in Delhi. After twenty years of service, I took two years off to research a book on Orissan Paintings. When one is in service it does not give one time to think about oneself. During the two years of my research I started reflecting on my life—with a capital L—and decided to quit. I left the IAS when I was forty-seven, and have always felt that I should have done it a few years earlier.

On the literary front, I wrote poetry, like everyone else, when I was in school and college. My poems appeared in magazines, and while I was still in my teens, I had the audacity to bring out the juvenile outpourings in a book. I stopped writing when I joined service—perhaps the work overwhelmed me—but fortunately resumed writing after a gap of nearly fifteen years. My first collection

of poems, *Pratham Purush,* came out in 1971. Like many first collections of poetry, it was published not by a regular publisher but by a friend, who never published a second book.

Now let me take a break and read a poem from this collection. The poem "The Mask" originally in Oriya, is translated into English by Deba Patnaik and appears in the collection, *First Person.* (Another translation of the poem, by Jayanta Mahapatra, appears in this volume.)

As I have said, I spent the best part of my working life in Government service, which absorbed most of my time and energy during that period. Before I talk about that life, let me answer an FAQ —frequently asked question—Why is it that in Orissa most bureaucrats write poetry? For one thing it is not statistically correct, for there would be many more college teachers than civil servants in Orissa who write poetry. Secondly, it is not that the civil servants started writing poetry after becoming bureaucrats. I for one began writing poetry at a time when I was not aware of such a thing as the IAS, much less thinking of joining it. Perhaps the job availability in Orissa being what it was and still is, many writers joined government service. Gopinath Mohanty, the doyen of Oriya writers and a prolific one, was also a bureaucrat. So the question should be: Why do so many Oriya poets join the bureaucracy? A question only sociologists can answer.

But let me try to answer it in my own way. Since a writer cannot live on his writing, especially when he is writing in a language like Oriya, he has to have some other profession for a livelihood. There is nothing like an ideal other job for a writer. If he is a good writer, no job he does other than writing can harm him; if he is a bad writer, no other job would help him. Once William Faulkner had been asked about which profession is best suited to a writer. For him it was playing the piano in a brothel, because the hours are easy, the company nice and there is plenty of opportunity for interesting conversation. I think bureaucracy also has many of these advantages, though I would not quite go to the extent of equating government service with playing a piano in a brothel! In any case, the poet can never make enough

money from his writings. Kautilya states in his *Arthashastra* that the court poet in the Mauryan society received the same fee as a third grade courtesan. Perhaps I have answered the question why so many poets join bureaucracy.

Coming back to my own professional career in government service, I consider the three years I had spent in Kalahandi in a field job as Collector, forty years back, as the most rewarding experience for me. Today people are familiar with the name of Kalahandi as they are with Biafra and Somalia, but forty years back when I went there on a posting, it was back of the beyond even for Oriyas. It was in 1965-66 that Kalahandi first came to national notice when a famine hit the district. For the first time a Prime Minister visited this god-forsaken land. Since communication to this place was very poor, Indira Gandhi had to go there by helicopter.

Orissa had gone through a severe famine a hundred years earlier in 1866, when a third of its population had perished, and people talked that it was going to happen again after a century. The 1866 famine was a man-made disaster, for the administration had wrongly believed that there was enough foodgrain available in Orissa and refused to stop the export of grains or to bring in grains on government account.

In Kalahandi in 1965, by the middle of August it was felt that a scarcity situation was developing due to failure of rains. So I sent a report to Government: "It is apprehended that sufficient stocks of rice cannot be procured to meet the food situation of this year if the dispatch of stocks from the various railheads of this district is not completely stopped.... I have restricted movement of foodgrains outside the district and have also issued instructions to the railway station masters not to honour any indent for dispatch of stocks from Kalahandi."

I will now quote a reply to show how higher-ups in government do not always understand the situation in the field. The reply says: "I have no doubt that there is more rice in your district than you imagine and further that the crops of the current year will suffice for the year's

supply. You must on no account interfere with legitimate trade, either import or export."

Let me quickly add that the response I just read out was not addressed to me but to the Collector of Balasore who had made a similar request a hundred years earlier. The letter was written in 1866 by the British Commissioner Ravenshaw. I had come across this letter when I was researching for a book on 19th century Orissa.

The reply I got in 1965, a hundred years later was a little more detailed. It said: "It has been decided by government to continue dispatches of rice from Kalahandi district. It is further decided that movement of rice through free trade channels should not be restricted. The instructions issued to the civil supplies staff and the railway authorities should be withdrawn forthwith."

There was a complete failure of crops that year and by March 1966, the situation had become grave. I will read out the highlights of the report I had made at that time:

The distress caused by drought is becoming worse day by day. The following facts indicate how the situation has reached near-famine conditions:

There is an abnormal increase in crimes; need has arisen for gratuitous relief; reports are being received about starvation deaths; the general condition of the health of the people has deteriorated. There is high incidence of cases of malnutrition; cases of desertion of children have been reported.

There is a heavy influx of beggars, cripples and diseased persons to towns and big villages in search of alms. There are also signs of increased wandering and restlessness of beggars in these areas.

Families have deserted their villages in search of work elsewhere. Free kitchens are attracting quite a number of disabled persons.

Having read my prosaic report, let me now read out a poem I wrote on Kalahandi some years later. The poem appears in the English anthology *Diurnal Rites*.

Kalahandi still appears in the newspapers today with similar reports even after forty years. And this is the first time I am reading the poem together with an official report. I find it rather ironical that

some people may know me for the poem, but the relief work I had undertaken in Kalahandi is already forgotten.

This makes me ponder over the writer's role in society and its problems. What can or should a poet do in a situation like Kalahandi or the more immediate situation that confronts us in Gujarat? Can the poet take up the role of an activist? Should he go to Kalahandi or Gujarat and will his presence there be of any use? Unfortunately, the poet as activist is not a happy picture. This is because such casual activism presents certain inane features: the touristic impulse to visit the action and join in, the cheerful ignorance of the issues involved, the brevity and the futility of the participation, and the desire to experience the thrill of action without any of its tedious preparation and painful consequences.

So, then, what does a poet do? So far as the problem is concerned he can do no more or no less than any ordinary sensitive person. But he can also write about it. It is sometimes expected that a writer must also offer solutions to the problem in his writings. But as Chekhov once said, between the solution of a question and the correct setting of a question, the latter alone is obligatory for the artist. So if the poet can present the true situation in Gujarat in his writings, he would have done his duty. It is enough for the poet to be the guilty conscience of his times. I have tried to do that in the Kalahandi poem. There is, however, a lot of expectation from poetry, which to my mind is rather misplaced.

Having said that let me now read a poem about poetry, the title of which is "Meaning of Poetry". The poem appears in the collection *The Unreal City.*

So that is what poets and poetry are all about. It is true that life is getting more prosaic and less poetic. It is true that there is difficulty in finding publishers for poetry. But none has yet written off poetry as a gone case, and though they talk of end of history and end of civilization, no one has suggested the end of poetry. New poets are born and poetry books are published every day.

Some complain about the incomprehensibility of modern poetry. They must know that the poem is like a picnic; the poet brings the

words, the readers bring the sense. The reader not only construes, he also constructs. He not only decodes a poem, he makes it. So, if a reader fails to make sense of a poem, he has only himself to blame!

From poetry let me now move to some other genres I have tried. I wrote my first full-length play in 1972. This play had only four characters. It is said that every playwright has a repertory in his head with so many actors and actresses. Shakespeare had a repertory of about twenty characters, Tennessee Williams five or six, and Beckett only one or two; in some cases Beckett's second character was a clone of the first one.

So far as I am concerned, I have a cast of only four to five characters in all my plays.

Let me now read the beginning of the play *Before the Sunset.* You would notice that the first Act starts without any stage directions. That is because I have found that no director ever follows the lengthy stage directions given by the playwright; the directors decide it their own way.

I am afraid I did a poor job reading the dialogue. An actor would certainly have done better. On the stage, a play is only as good as its director and actors. I may add that the production of this play *Before the Sunset* had gone off very well in its Hindi version in Delhi since it had the benefit of having Ramgopal Bajaj directing it and Om Puri playing the main role of the protagonist.

I think I should say something about other productions of the play. It was first staged in its Bangla version in Calcutta in 1972, the same year it was written. A friend in the Calcutta All India Radio had translated it and the script was picked up by Shyamal Sen of Theatre Guild. In 1974, it was produced on Cuttack AIR in Oriya, and as it won some award or other, it was translated into Hindi and sent to Delhi. Dinanath of AIR gave the script to Bajaj who produced it in 1976. The play had its first production in Oriya in 1977 only. *Enact* magazine published an English translation and other languages showed interest.

I wrote my last play in 1994—it is a historical play *Sundar Das*, about the situation created by the early missionaries in Orissa in the early 19th century. That play is yet to be staged.

I started writing fiction rather late in life. Now let me come to my first short story which I wrote only in 1980. The story "Words" was called "Shabdbhed" in the original and it was about a poet and poetry. It is in my collection of short stories *The Magic Deer.*

I think it is time to go back to poetry. The title of the poem I am going to read next is "The Daffodil". You may wonder why a vernacular, bhasha poet should be writing about this exotic flower. All of us who have read some English in the classroom are quite familiar with Wordsworth and the flower, and as a matter of fact my poem is about the English language in India. Before I read the poem, let me say something on the subject of English in India.

It is sometimes claimed that India is held together by the English language. This is a myth which should be debunked. As only about three per cent of our people know English, it is preposterous to suggest that the basis of our unity is so narrow and fragile. Actually, English divides us more sharply than any other cleavage. Equally baneful is its cultural impact; even after their departure, the colonical masters continue to rule our minds.

For the new urban culture, I am now quoting Aijaz Ahmad, the only literary document produced in English is a national document. All else is regional, hence minor and forgettable, so that English emerges in this imagination not as one of the Indian languages, which it undoubtedly is, but of literary sophistication and bourgeoise civility. A report on the so-called International Festival of Indian Literature held recently states that the Festival was a celebration of Indian writing which also (mark the word *also)* sought to showcase the work of Bhasha writers. It is as if English writing is the pacesetter, front runner and winner and the bhashas are the "also rans." This attitude needs to be condemned.

There have been many studies which have shown how English literature was used as an instrument of colonization. As early as 1981 Chiplunkar, the Marathi literary critic, had said: Crushed by English poetry, our freedom has been destroyed. This has been brought out more graphically—and literally—by JG Farrel in his novel *The Siege of Krishnapore* (1973). During the so called Sepoy Mutiny, the

embattled English are holed up in their cantonment and run out of cannon balls. They start using household articles like pots and pans in the canons to fire at the Sepoys. The most effective, however, is a metal head of Shakespeare, which when shot through the cannon, 'scythed through a whole platoon of sepoys advancing in a single file'. And as Premchand put it, the dominance of English language is the most demeaning, the most extensive and the harshest aspect of our subjugation.

My poem is about English which is still being used to colonise our minds.

Let me now move on to some children's verses and nonsense verses I have written. They have been published in two collections called *Alimalika* and *Alukuchi-Malkuchi,* both the funny sounding words meaning odds and ends in Oriya. It is very difficult to translate nonsense verses and children's verses, because they use many linguistic puns, alliterations and onoematopic words in the original language. Besides, each language has its own way of expressing the sounds of animals. For instance, a dog says bow wow or woof woof in English, but in Bangla he says *gheu-gheu,* in Hindi *bhon-bhon,* and in Oriya *bhoh-bhoh.* The goat bleats *may-may* in Oriya, the frog croaks *katarkay* And that creates problems in translation. It is like translating "Jabberwocky", which is a challenge to translators. I have translated some of my own children's and nonsense verses, which I am going to read out.

A Frequently Asked Question is: Is Delhi the right place for a creative person? How do you write in Oriya living in Delhi? I could simply quote from Rushdie's infamous New Yorker article and say: Literature has little, or nothing to do with a writer's address.

I have been living in Delhi for about 30 years now. I came here for my job, but have stayed back by choice. Delhi has its burgeoning population, deadly pollution, high rate of crime, unfriendly climate, and insensitive people. But it also has its varied cultural life, its beautiful winter, its cosmopolitan character, not to forget its IIC and the Lodhi Gardens. Besides, I think one chooses to live in a place

mainly for the friends one has there, and I have many friends in Delhi, and in that list I include all of you present with me this evening here.

Let me now talk about the creative process. A poet has to go through three hells: The hell of emotional experience. In this the poet is no different from others. The second hell is the hell of creation. This is the most difficult. For me anything that is not writing a poem is easy like filling up the Income Tax Return, or doing a crossword puzzle. The third hell which is the cruellest and severest of all is the hell of assessment, evaluation and criticism, where the critics take great pleasure in tearing the poem to pieces. Bangla poet Jibanananda Das was so hurt by criticism that he wrote a whole poem about such critics where he called them scavengers feeding on the dead bodies of poets. Anyway, asking a poet about critics is like asking the lamppost what it thinks of dogs.

My next poem is "Fear". In India, in its modern history, partition was perhaps the worst national trauma, We have not experienced the Second World War like the Americans or the Europeans, The Americans have been traumatized by later wars in Vietnam and Operation Desert Storm. For Indians war means the Mahabharat war. As for the partition trauma, it was not felt all over the country. For instance it hardly traumatized Orissa. For me personally, the only public trauma I have gone through is the Emergency. The poem is my response to that experience. It is included in the collection *The Diurnal Rites.*

Writers often say that they are not worried if nobody reads them today, since Time is the best judge. It is also said that a writer's work can be impartially judged only after he is dead, his friends are dead and his enemies are dead. Arthur Koestler talked about exchanging a hundred readers today for ten readers ten years hence, and a single reader a hundred years later. Tagore also talked about someone reading his poem a hundred years hence. And Bhavabhuti spoke about like minded readers in some unknown future. But unless one is conceited, and is certain of some such a thing as posterity, one would certainly like to have some readers now and here. I think I would be happy with ten readers today and maybe another ten tomorrow.

One of the standard questions asked during interviews is: what would you like to be if you were not a writer. I do not know the answer to that question. It is said that there are three tests to find out what is the right metier for a person: When he is doing it, he does not feel that he should be doing something else. It produces a sense of accomplishment, and once in a while, pride. It's frightening.

For me, writing is the only thing that passes the three tests. And so here I am.

(Transcript of speech delivered by J.P. Das in the 'Meet The Author' programme of the Sahitya Akademi held at the India International Centre on December 4, 2002.

The poems and other writings referred to in the speech appear elsewhere in this volume.)

3

Interview 1

1. Why did you want to be a poet?

Right from my childhood, reading has given me the greatest enjoyment. (It still does, and I spend much of my time reading all sorts of books). While young, I read a lot of poetry too and tried my hand at writing. I started sending these juvenile efforts to journals and some generous editors published them. It is not that I ever thought of taking up writing as a career—no one writing in Oriya does. As a matter of fact, I had stopped writing at a crucial stage of my life, between the ages of 18 and 34, but fortunately returned to my muse.

2. Who is the model for your style?

I do not think I have adopted any 'model' for my poetry. I am rather catholic in my reading habits and have read much poetry, both old and new, written in many languages. I have never thought of following any particular poet's style. The influences on me may be many and varied, but I have written the way I wanted.

3. What is the usual process you adopt before writing a poem?

When asked the question "how do you write poems", Ka in Orhan Pamuk's novel *Snow* had replied: "I have no idea how poems

are written. A good poem always seems to come from outside, from far away". I think any poet's answer will be similar. Though poems 'come' to me (most often when I want them to, they do not), I have to toil editing, polishing, adding and deleting and making final versions.

4. How do you distinguish poetry from non-poetry?

I have no interest in literary theories and have kept myself away from discussions of the same. Is there some such thing as non-poetry? Is something that is not poetry non-poetry? Is it prose? (It is said that the real opposite of poetry is not prose but science). Well, I do not know. But I know what poetry is when I react it. I know what good poetry is when I read the poem again and it gives me as much pleasure as it had on a first reading. This is something, I am afraid, I am unable to define in words.

5. What fundamental misconceptions about poetry irritate you and how would you correct or refute them?

What saddens me is the general impression that all modern poetry is obscure and unintelligible. Instead of shunning poetry, it would be better if readers treated poetry with a little more patience, for they would surely be rewarded. I have seen quite a few poetry-haters turn poetry-lovers.

6. How does a poem come into being?

A poem is always somewhere there. The poet is someone who looks for it and claims it. The real difficult part is to give the poem its concrete shape: putting one word after another, arranging and rearranging them, to build up a sequence of lines, breathing life into it, and bringing it to a suitable conclusion. Having created the poem, the poet then surrenders it to the care of readers and goes on to search for a new poem.

7. How does timeless appeal come to poetry?

Only time can tell what poetry has timeless appeal. Tastes, judgments, attitudes and response to ideas and language all change in course of time. Yesterday's hot dish becomes today's stale leftover. A poet can only hope with Bhavabhuti that at some distant future some like-minded person would share his thoughts. Tagore had imagined a reader who was reading his poem, with curiosity, a hundred years hence. Love, death, time, mysteries of life are concepts which have a timeless appeal. But a poem dealing with these may not have a long life since poems are made not only with ideas, but also equally with words.

8. What is the fundamental as well as essential nature of poetry? Does it change over time?

Let literary theorists and aestheticists wangle over the questions. As a practicing poet, I think it is enough to be able to write some poems rather than worry over the nature of poetry. Everything under the sun is in a state of flux, and so I guess the nature of poetry must also be undergoing changes.

9. What is most important in poetry? What makes a genuinely great poem?

Each element that goes to make an assortment of words a poem is important: the theme and language, the text and the subtext, the way words are set against each other, the disposition of the lines, the punctuation marks (or even their absence), the whole lot. The way it is said is as important as what is said; what is left unsaid can sometimes be important too.

As to what is genuinely a great poem, I can do no better, that paraphrase Emily Dickinson: "If I read a poem and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that it is a great poem. If I feel physically as if the top of the head were taken off, I know that it is great poetry."

10. What is that relationship between poetry and truth?

It is difficult to view poetry apart from truth. The Grecian Urn could as well have said "Poetry is truth, truth poetry". While there might be truths, poetry is celebration of Truth.

11. What is the relation between tradition and innovation in poetry?

What was hailed as innovation yesterday is today sneered at as traditional. Religious poetry gave way to secular. Ideas change, knowledge is updated, newer galaxies open up. Innovation is a continuous process of building anew on the same tradition it is trying to leave behind. This process is built into the word innovation itself, which means 'to make changes in something already existing.'

12. Can poetry counter the paralyzing effect of globalization?

If the question is whether poetry can save itself from globalization, the answer is yes. Globalization is a process by which the experience of everyday life is getting standardized in the world. Fortunately, poetry is not a commodity for sale in the global shopping mall, nor is it an ad for soft drinks. Poets have always been without borders and have reached beyond geographical, cultural, language and political boundaries. But poets must resist standardization and write in their own language of their own cultural memories and experiences. They must follow Gandhi's dictum of keeping the windows open for cultural winds of all lands to blow in, but must also refuse to be blown off their feet.

As for countering the paralyzing economic, social and political effects of globalization, though poetry might make nothing happen, it can certainly add its poetical bit to the voice of millions protesting against colonizing in the garb of globalizing.

(Interviewed by Manu Dash, published in *Muse India* Jan-Feb 2008)

Interview 2

Q. 1: In this volume [*A Time Elsewhere*] you've focused on the historical-cum-social settings of Orissa till about the year 1907. Why didn't you stretch it still further because the fact stands out that most of us Indians know little of Orissa—of its historical grandeur and literary scene and social settings?

A: Let me talk about how I came to write this book (*A Time Elsewhere,* Penguin 2009. Original Oriya *Desh-Kaal-Patra* published in 1992). I was doing research for a book on a traditional Oriya artist of the second half of the 19th century and was reading up available material about that time. I found it a momentous period in Orissa's history covering a devastating famine which decimated a third of the province's population, and its subsequent regeneration; the rise of a nationalistic feeling among the people; and the blossoming of Oriya language, literature and culture. The novel portrays this half century of Orissa's history.

My novel starts in 1859 with the so-called raja of Orissa on his death bed and ends in 1907 with the great Oriya poet Radhanath Ray confessing to his adultery. I could have started with the British occupation of Orissa in 1803 and ended with the creation of a separate province of Orissa in 1936. But that would have been a different book.

Q. 2: Comment on the rather grim reality that for a great majority there are just about two prime aspects associated with present day Orissa—the Kalahandi starvation deaths or the anti-Christian communal riots of Kandhamal?

A: It is true that Orissa is today best known outside for starvation deaths in Kalahandi and anti-Christian killings in Kandhamal. I was in Kalahandi in 1966 when the famine there had reminded me of the great famine of a hundred years earlier. However, during the last forty years, many poverty alleviating schemes have been introduced and if there are starvation deaths it must be due to the failure of the administrative machinery. As for the anti-Christian atrocities, it is of a more recent development in Orissa; it grew out of rising Hindu fundamentalism leading to the killing of the missionary Staines. Kandhamal riots are, however, a little more complicated, brought about by conflict between tribals and scheduled castes, confrontation of Hindu and Christian proselytisers, and the politics of including castes and tribes in the schedules. Solutions would have to be found keeping religious leaders out of these discussions.

I have a poem dealing with Kalahandi and had written a play about problems of Christian proselytisation much before Staines happened.

Q. 3: As an Oriya you have spent your childhood and a part of your adulthood in Orissa. What imprints of Oriya traditions and social settings have left a mark on your psyche? Do roots matter for a writer?

A: Though I have by now spent more than half my life outside Orissa and am a Delhiwalla for all purposes, I continue to be one hundred percent Oriya. Fortunately cosmopolitan Delhi makes this possible. I grew up in Orissa and Orissa shaped me, and most of my literary and cultural contacts are there. I do all my creative writing in Oriya only and consider Orissa my constituency. With the present day communication facilities—both efficient and cheap—I do not consider Orissa far away.

Q. 4: You have been a topper of your IAS batch, yet you decided to quit the service whilst at the peak of your career.... Surely you could have written poetry and prose even whilst pushing files?

A: A writer, especially one writing in a bhasha language, cannot make a living on her writings alone; she has to have another profession. IAS was such a profession for me. Yes, there are many writers who have juggled their writing with the other professional work, which gave them sustenance. But I thought I would not be able to do justice to either if I continued both simultaneously. So I quit.

Q. 5: Writers living in regional locales and writing in the vernacular languages are at a disadvantage. In your opinion what could be / should be done to focus on those writers who are living far away from the media glare and live and die unsung?

A: I think in literature the local is the universal. A picture of a locality can have universal appeal. I do not think the so called 'vernacular' or 'bhasha' literature is at a disadvantage. It has its own readership and though it may not be as widely known (or as good a royalty-earner) as English, its writer certainly does not die unsung. TV cameras may not follow her, but she has not been abandoned by her readers. Many bhasha writers have made the national scene through translations.

Q. 6: What is the present day literary scene in Orissa and do tell us about some of the well known Oriya writers of today?

A: I should say that the literary scene in Orissa today is quite vibrant and energetic. The writers of my generation are fading out and a whole new group of younger writers have taken over. I must however add that there is a big deficiency so far as writing of novels and plays is concerned.

Q. 7: Writers and poets are said to be restless. How would you describe yourself?

A: I am only a Sunday writer, and cannot claim to be a typical writer with writerly attributes. I am only as restless as my neighbour next door.

Q. 8: What are you presently working on? It's said that turbulent times provokes creativity. How provoked you get seeing the political-cum-social mess around? Does it provoke you to write and offload?

A: I am writing very little these days. I spend all my time reading ail sorts of things. Of course I have many ideas and plans to write so

many things, but the problem is that literature is not made with these; it is made with words. Health, circumstances, laziness, and something called 'mood' have all conspired against me.

Q. 9: Comment on the role of translators—especially in the context of the fact that this very novel of yours was originally written in Oriya and now translated to English?

A: I was lucky to have a good translator who translated this book; Jatindra K. Nayak has done a great job of it. Orissa is fortunate to have a set of excellent translators into English who have been able to project Oriya literature outside. I would like to put on record the great work done by other translators besides Nayak: Bikram K. Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, K.K. and Leelawati Mohapatra and Paul St-Pierre, who have innumerable works of translation to their credit and are active even now. I must add that besides a good translator, a good publisher is also needed to promote the translated work; otherwise all the good labour is wasted.

(Interviewed by Humra Quraishi, published in *The Tribune*, Chandigarh, Sunday, 18th April, 2010)

Translations

1

Lakshmi Purana

– Balaram Das

This is an abridged and free translation of the Oriya Lakshmi Purana Suanga (also called Manabasa—installation of the mana or grain measure). Written by Balaram Das (fifteenth-sixteenth century), the poem is recited even today during observance of the Lakshmi Puja or Manabasa vrat. This vrat is celebrated on all Thursdays in the month of Margashira (December-January).

Houses are cleaned a day before the puja and in the villages they are plastered with cow-dung. Floors and walls are decorated with designs made out of rice paste and doorways with strings of green mango leaves and bunches of ripe (yellow) paddy of the ritual. Though the puja is performed by women, the Purana is usually recited aloud by a man or a young boy of the house. This story became the theme of a very popular Oriya film made in the 50s. It has a long tradition of being enacted as an intensely entertaining and popular folk play.

Among several contradictions inherent in this text, is that no outsider, not even a married daughter, is to partake in the ceremony or accept the Prasad, even though Lakshmi herself demands of Jagannath that Brahmins and chandals should accept food from one another's hands. However, Lakshmi's manner of revolt provides us with fascinating insight into the manner in which women sabotage the ideology of servitude, even while paying lip service to it. Lakshmi enjoins women to consider worship of husbands as the highest vrat, even while she herself launches a fierce revolt against her own husband's tyranny towards her and his refusal to consider certain castes as equal to

others. She returns to the house only after she is able to make her husband accept her own more humane and egalitarian value system as well as her own autonomy.

– Madhu Kishwar

Salutation to thee, mother Kamala, daughter of the ocean. Salutations to thee, Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort. Salutations to Kamala, the benevolent, who looks after all beings, inert and living. He who listens to your life story with attention or remembers you with devotion is delivered of his poverty.

Here I narrate your story.

One day, sages Narada and Parashara, in the course of their travel, entered a village. It was Thursday in the month of Margashira and the village folk were celebrating the holy occasion, worshiping Lakshmi.

Narada asked Parashara, "What is this ritual? What is this *vrat* that Brahmin and Chandalas alike are celebrating? Who are they worshiping and what are the rituals?"

Parashara said, "This is the worship of Lakshmi on the Dhanamanika Thursday. Margashira is the supreme among the months of the year and Thursday in this month is Lakshmi's favourite day. Of the Thursdays, the first Thursday is especially important. If that day happens to be the tenth day of the bright fortnight, Sudasha *vrat* is performed on that day."

Narada said, "Do tell me who has gained by observing the *vrat* and who has suffered ignoring Lakshmi."

Parashara then narrated this story: One day Lakshmi told Jagannath (Vishnu) with folded hands, "Lord, it is my *vrat* day today and if you permit, I would go round the city." Jagannath having agreed, Lakshmi bedecked herself in fine clothes and ornaments and jewellery, took the form of an old Brahmin woman and went to the house of a trader. There she asked the lady of the house, "How is it that you have not decorated the house for Mahalakshmi *vrat*?" The woman said, "Do tell me how and for whom the *vrat* is to be performed." Lakshmi told her: "Wash the floor with cow-dung and decorate it with rice flour. On a low table, spread some newly

harvested paddy grains of white colour. Fill a *mana* (grain-measure) with such grains and place it on the table. Wash three betel nuts in turmeric water and place them on the *mana*. Decorate the place with vegetables, flowers and coloured cloth. Then invoke Mahalakshmi with lamp and incense and make three offerings of meals. Prepare special pancakes and sweets and eat that Prasad after prayer. Many things are taboo for women during this period: giving Mahalakshmi's Prasad to outsiders even to a married daughter, beating the children, not cleaning the cooking vessels till all the black is gone, spreading the bed crooked, disobeying the in-laws, sleeping naked, applying oil, and so on. If it happens to be the last day of the dark fortnight on Thursday, a woman should not wash the mouth after meals, face south or west while eating, tie and dress hair in the evening, eat in the dark room, apply oil on the body after bath, be angry with or disobey the husband. Lakshmi does not leave the house of the woman who treats her husband as god, is of clean habits and shares her husband's happiness and sorrow. Lakshmi shuns the house of the woman who is adulterous, lazy, dirty, quarrelsome and disrespectful to the husband. The married woman has no future without her husband. If she does vain *vrats* leaving aside service to her husband, she is destined to be reborn as a child widow."

So saying, Lakshmi asked the trader's wife to prepare for the *vrat* and went on to visit other houses. In the course of her visits, she entered the street where low caste *chandals* lived and entered the house of a *chandal* woman Shriya on the outskirt of the town. Shriya, a devotee of Vishnu, had woken up early in the morning and had made preparations for worship with flowers and offerings. She was now praying to Lakshmi to accept her devotions.

Lakshmi could not resist the lotus flowers and stepped on them. Thus appearing before the *chandala* woman she asked her to seek a boon from her. The *Chandala* woman said, "Give me a hundred thousand cows, wealth befitting Kuvera, a son in my lap, ornaments for my arms and immortality," Lakshmi said, "All these will be gifted to you except immortality."

At this time, Jagannath and his elder brother Balaram were hunting in the forest. Balaram called Jagannath and said, "Look at your wife's conduct. She is now in a Chandala's house. She goes to the huts of low-caste *hadis* and *panas* and comes back to the temple without even taking a bath. This she does every day. She is supposed to care for the poor and so the *chandala* woman worships her. Well, if you are so fond of your wife, go and build a palace in the Chandala Street. Listen to me and drive her out. It ill behoves you to have such a wife."

Jagannath said, 'If we throw her out, we cannot get a wife like Lakshmi again. What we can do is to get her back into caste by paying a fine of five lakh rupees to the inhabitants of heaven. If she repeats this, we will throw her out of the temple. We may excuse her this once.' Balaram said, 'If your Lakshmi stays, I do not stay, A wife is like a pair of sandals. If you have your brother, you can have ten million wives. If you still feel for your wife, go and build a palace in the *chandal* street; don't come back to my great temple.' Jagannath could take no more of this and they came to the main gate of the temple.

In the meantime, Lakshmi gave Shriya all she desired, a mansion of sandalwood, plenty of gold, and five sons. After this she returned to the temple to find the brothers sitting on the doorway. When she wanted to enter, Jagannath said, 'We have nothing to do with you who have been to the *chandal* street. If it were only me, I would have excused you your transgression, but brother has seen this and has reprimanded me enough. You are the worst of sinners. You move about like a mad woman. You cannot live in my house.'

Lakshmi said, 'Throw me out after giving me a divorce.' Jagannath said, 'In our caste, there is no system of divorce.' Lakshmi said, 'You got me out of the churning of the ocean and you had promised to my father Varuna that you would excuse ten transgressions of mine. I have only committed one and that you do not tolerate.' Jagannath said angrily, 'Your father is just so much salt and he is roaring all the time. We had to build a wall around the temple to escape the noise.'

Lakshmi said, 'You want to throw me out since I stayed a while in the house of an untouchable. You talk of caste and since you are gods,

everything is excused. What about your own caste? You lived in a cowherd's house. You ate in Nima's house; you ate left over fruits form Jara. Both you brothers are therefore low caste, no less. If the wife commits a mistake, the husband must bear it. For one transgression, the master does not remove his servant.'

Jagannath said, "I cannot disobey my brother. I will give you a daily ration for the time being and maybe bring you back later after persuading brother." Lakshmi said, "I do not want a daily ration. I will leave like a helpless orphan. I will go to my father's house. Take away your ornaments and do not accuse me later." So saying Lakshmi took off all her ornaments and gave them to her husband. He said, "When a man sends away his wife, he gives her clothes and food for six months. Take these ornaments, sell them and buy your clothes and food." Lakshmi said, "When you get another wife, give her these ornaments. I leave like a lowly orphan. As true as the movement of sun and moon, you will have nothing to eat. For twelve years, you will be destitute and will get no food, water or clothes. When I, a Chandala woman serve you food, then only you will get to eat."

Lakshmi then left the temple and calling Vishwakarma asked him to build her a small hut. Vishwakarma built a palace with walls of gold and columns of coral and this pleased Lakshmi. She then summoned the eight Vetalas and asked them to ransack the kitchen and pantry in the temple and bring everything to her. When the Vetalas said they were afraid of Jagannath catching them in the act. Lakshmi asked Nidradevi to make the two brothers sleep till the next day. The Vetalas now brought everything to Lakshmi, who found that they had not brought back the golden bejeweled beds on which the brothers slept. The Vetalas went back and brought these after throwing the two brothers on ordinary string beds, as also the costly garments of the brothers. Lakshmi then called Saraswati and asked her to go to every house and ask the householders not to give food and water to Jagannath.

When the brothers woke up, they found the place deserted and everything gone. Jagannath said, "This is what happens when Lakshmi leaves." Balaram said, "Don't say such things about a mere

wife. If a wife is lost, does it mean that the husband has to go hungry?" They then went to the kitchen and the pantry, but there was nothing inside. They went to the Indradyumna tank, but there was not a drop of water in it.

Having spent the day without food and water, they decided to go out begging. Wearing torn clothes, sacred thread on the shoulder and broken umbrella in hand, the brothers now looking like Brahmin beggars went round asking for water to drink. Wherever they went, they were taken to be thieves and driven out. At one place when a Brahmin woman wanted to serve them rice, the utensil containing rice simply vanished. At another place, they were served some parched rice, but Lakshmi who knows everything, asked the wind-god to blow it away. The brothers then thought of entering the pond and eating lotus roots, but as soon as they entered the pond the water became mud.

The brothers then went to the sea shore, the abode of Lakshmi's father. There at the portals of the palace they recited the Vedas and when the maid servants came out, they asked for food. The maids reported this to Lakshmi, who asked them to go to the Brahmins and tell them that they could not possibly eat food prepared by a *Chandala* woman. When told this, Balaram said, "Give us utensils and provisions; we will do our own cooking." Lakshmi sent them utensils and rice and vegetables but also urged Agni not to provide any heat to the firewood when the brothers cooked.

Thus frustrated, the brothers agreed to eat in Lakshmi's house even if it meant losing caste. Lakshmi then cooked a great meal for them and the maids served it to the brothers who ate to their hearts' content after prolonged starvation.

When the brothers were resting outside the palace after the hearty meals, Lakshmi sent the maids to ask them if they were married. Jagannath said, "I sent away a wife like Lakshmi; hence our misfortune." The maids said, "How can a man become poor if he forsakes his wife?" Jagannath said, "There are wives who bring wealth; there are also wives who bring death in the family."

Balaram now asked Jagannath to go and hold Lakshmi's hand and tell her that it was all his, Balaram's fault. Lakshmi could live wherever she wanted and he would never again try to forbid her. Jagannath went inside and as soon as Lakshmi saw him, she was all smiles. She then washed his feet and from the water thus sanctified she sipped a little and a little she sprinkled on her head. She worshipped his lotus feet with flowers. Then she said to him, 'You drove me out as a *Chandala* woman, but ate in the very same woman's house. Both of you have thus lost caste. Shame on your greatness; shame on your vows. Shame on your brother and your promise. Now what do you want?'

Jagannath said, 'We have suffered a lot because of you. The world now knows us as beggars. Everyone knows that it is you who fed us. Whoever listens to this Purana on Thursday will be absolved of sins. The woman who recites this on Lakshmi puja day will go to heaven.'

Lakshmi said, 'You must promise this to me. *Chandalas* and *Brahmins* will have no food taboos henceforth; they should eat from each other's hand. Only then will I go back to the temple.' Jagannath agreed and took Lakshmi by her hand and with Balaram returned to the great temple. Balaram said, 'A home is beautiful only when the lady of the house is there. Now I know how great Lakshmi is.'

Narada listened to the story. It is only through the grace of Lakshmi that the wretched *Chandala* woman was blessed with wealth. Success comes to those who read this Purana. All sins vanish as with sunrise. Those who recite or listen to this Purana earn the benefits of a trillion cow-gifts. This Purana is the way to salvation.

Thus ends the Lakshmi Purana written by Balaram Das.

(Published in *Manushi* 73, Nov-Dec 1992)

2

Dear Oriyas, Rise!

– Utkal Deepika

Differential policies of the British between the regions of Bengal and Orissa resulted in their uneven development during colonial times. A self-reflexive essay published in an Oriya journal Utkal Deepika in 1866 looked into the cause of the decline of the Oriya people in the 19th Century and exhorted them to rise again to their past stature. This essay was located for this column, as well as translated and introduced by J.P. Das a well-known writer of our time, who in addition to his path breaking contribution to Oriya poetry has written fiction and plays, also books on art history. This is the concluding instalment of Past Continuous, a 12-part series of extracts from early Indian texts translated into English which have been appearing in this column since February 2000.

This is an abridged version of a longer piece that was published in two instalments in the Oriya fortnightly Utkal Deepika in September and October 1866. This was the year in which the worst ever famine in Orissa decimated about a third of its population. The commission of inquiry set up by the British to go into the causes of the famine brought up the issue of the character of the Oriya people. It was suggested that had the Oriyas not been lazy and inefficient, they could have saved themselves by taking advantage of the various relief schemes provided by the Government. This essay is probably a reaction against that stricture. Invoking the past glory of the Oriyas, the author lays the blame for their present decline on the British colonial policy which favoured Bengal at the cost of Orissa. The piece appeared anonymously, but, in all probability, it was written by the editor of the paper, Gauri Shankar Ray, a

Bengali who had settled down in Orissa and upheld the cause of Oriya against Bengali.

The complex relationship between the Oriyas and their Bengali neighbours began in the 19th Century after the East India Company drove the Marathas away in 1803. Bengalis became the main work force of the Company administration in Orissa and, due to a faulty revenue policy, these petty officials and clerks also found it easy to acquire land there. The people of Orissa were further impoverished during the Company rule by the closure of indigenous industries like shipping and salt. Through loss of land and wealth the Oriyas became second to Bengalis in their own land.

– Meenakshi Mukherjee

Is there any truth in the slander that Oriyas are deficient in understanding? Outsiders say that, however much they try, Oriyas cannot attain the higher levels of education in any discipline. But serious thinking on this subject will reveal the falsity of this view. Oriyas have by nature been accomplished—whether it is in the field of learning, in the use of arms, in architecture or in the arts.

Antipathy of the present rulers and their active discouragement are the causes of the present decline in the Oriyas. How is it that our neighbours, the Bengalis, are so advanced? Is it not mainly because of the patronage they have received from the British? See how much money and effort the Government and generous well-wisher of the State like David Hare have put in for the development of Bengal. If similar efforts had been made for unfortunate Orissa, would the people be in such sad state today? The English have extraordinary intelligence, but what were they before the Saxon occupation of England? Is not their development due to the care of others?

Language is the basis of a culture ... Look at the efforts being made for the development of the Bengali language. However, the Bengalis are yet to produce a kavya to match the kavyas penned by Oriya poets. It is, of course, true that many books of arithmetic, natural sciences, geography and literature have been published in Bengali, but these books are either translated or plagiarized from English. How many of these are original writings? Among original writings Bengalis

consider *Vidyasundar* to be an important book and its author Bharatchandra Ray is placed high as a poet.

But long before *Vidyasundar* was written, Dinakrishna Das wrote "Rasakallol" in Oriya, and when you compare the two, Dinakrishna is clearly superior to Bharatchandra in style of writing, description of nature, and in rhetorical composition.... Besides Dinakrishna, there were other poets who wrote on different themes. But, in the absence of a printing press, many books have been lost. The best of our poets—Upendra Bhanja—wrote some 52 books, of which only 20 or 25 are available now.

Whether it is *shringara, viraha, bhakti* or *karuna rasa,* Upendra Bhanja is the poet of unsurpassed rhetorical excellence. We may venture to say that, apart from Sanskrit, no other language has a poet to compare with him. Alas, it is heart-rending to see the present day apathy towards his writings! Will a day come when his writing will receive its due recognition?

When one sees the fall of Greek and Roman civilizations, the rise of England and the downslide of India, one realizes that nothing is permanent in the world. Everything changes in the course of time. Look at the city of Calcutta, which, till the other day, was a shrub land and playground of rabbits and jackals. It is today the capital of India with an array of tall buildings housing officials, army men and intellectuals. Many crowded, developing cities have been razed to the ground and many forest lands are growing into prosperous urban centres. Similar is the changeability of the human race.

The English were earlier savages and forest dwellers.... The same English today are flying their flag of glory all over the world through the power of their arms and their knowledge. There is no known river, ocean or bay on which English commercial boats do not ply. However, the Oriyas who had at one time, through armed conquest, extended their empire from the river Hoogly in the north to Cape Comorin in the south are weak and indolent today.

People who say "Oriyas are foolish by nature" are truly ignorant and near-sighted.... It is wrong to suppose that the great benevolent God has been partial in bestowing wisdom to some and foolishness to

others.... It is self-evident that the Creator has endowed all men with the same potential; each man has a basic intelligence and its improvement or deterioration depends on how he nurtures it.

In the past the Oriyas were skilled in the arts and crafts too. At one time Balasore textiles were famous. Who does not know of Cuttack silver filigree? Dear Oriyas, rise. Defend the good name of your forefathers. Remove form your forehead the blemish of ignorance that you have been cursed with. How long will you immerse yourself in the ocean of idleness? How long will you sleep in ignorance and be the object of ridicule of other people?

Remember that the night of our misfortune ended when the English came from the east coast and drove out the evil Maratha raiders.

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3

Emergency

– Gulzar

Why did the moon hide inside
the soiled bundle of clouds?

The moment it was gone,
darkness revealed its claws.
Innocent wayfarers
walking through the forest
shrieked in terror.
Why did the moon hide inside
the soiled bundle of clouds?

The moment it was gone,
the vampires came down
from the branches of trees
sinking their teeth
into the necks
of the wayfarers.

The vampires said,
To cross the forest
you have to pay with blood.

Why did the moon hide inside
the soiled bundle of clouds?

The moment it was gone,
the wayfarers
of the blood splattered night
knelt and cried,
Pray, give us light.

They looked skyward.
From inside the bundle,
the moon struck out a hand
with a flashing dagger.

Translated from the original Urdu

4

Riots

– Gulzar

They were not men
who got killed
in the communal riots.
They were mere names.

No heads were slain.
They were merely caps
with heads inside.

And the red stream
that you see flowing
down the street,
is merely blood
spilling from
slaughtered voices.

Translated from the original Urdu

5

Newspaper

– Gulzar

Day after day
I soak in blood.
It dries on my body.
I try to scratch out
the crusts of dried blood
but only peel off my skin.
I am left with
the raw smell of blood
and dark patches.

The newspaper
drops at my doorstep
every morning.

Soaked in blood.

Translated from the original Urdu

6

The Mother

– Catherine Clement

It's a nervous morning,
The widow, in white, always busy,
Bustles in and out,
The bunch of keys tied and hanging on
To the old sari.

Nothing is ready.
The sons are late.
The Goddess waits,
Eyes dazzling and Her many hands reddening,
Bejewelled with flowers and prayers.

The pujari, mumbles a secret,
In whispers, so that it connects
More closely to the world,
A world which might come apart,
Who knows?
He picks up the mirror,
Turns it around
And all of a sudden
Dips it in the pot.
In it the Goddess drowns

Her smiling image,
Unconcerned that She is going to disappear
For a whole year
Leaving behind mere straw and clay.
They can chase Her out now.
They shout and jostle
And drag Her outside the courtyard.

Her crown has fallen off
Her hand broken, a red thumb missing.
At last She is on the chariot.
She hesitates....

They carry Her on their shoulders
Lying on a bamboo frame
Her weight heavy on them
The sons, the nephews, the uncles,
They run
The Mother on their back.
Bethroned and triumphant
She moves through the city
A vain phantom scurrying to Her nothingness.

At the river they throw Her
The sun twinkles, the Mother whirls
Slowly,
And then She sinks.

Uncaged, the unique blue bird
Its throat a unique pink
Flies over the floating Mother
Now reduced to some mud and gold

And a certain smile.

Translated from the original French, with the poet.

7

Kalighat

– Catherine Clement

They sniff at the joyous dawn
The goats
Their flat noses smell the air
Their hair alive and shining
Their spots black
The water which washed them
Still dripping.

They jump merrily
The goats
Quivering under the caress
Jubilant under the flowers
Leaping on the pavement
Sticky with blood
They are hugged tight–
The goats.

Attached to the post
Their legs tied
They are not big
The goats
Childlike

Clumsy.

They do not see anything
The goats
Neither the gong above
Nor the curved knife
Nor the pujari who cuts the throats.

While praying to
The Black Goddess, the Terrible,
The Ravenous who everyday needs
The goats.

Translated from the original French, with the poet

8

Muslim Woman in Varanasi

– Catherine Clement

Sitting alone
Quiet under her grey burqa
When the fog invades the palaces
When the people worship in whispers
When the sanyasins, their eyes closed
Meditate before the supreme horizon
When the lights illuminate imperceptibly
The large peepul tree on top of the temple
When the first dark boats pick up the brides
Their hands painted red and gold in their hair
When the immense barges appear
Along the distant ghats of Ganga
She, whose eyes are invisible,
Surrounded with silence,
She prays.

Translated from the original French, with the poet

9

Prayer

– Basudev Sunani

Come,
Let's take off our clothes.

Let's take off Mahapatra's coat
from god Brahma's body;
let's take off Mohanty's suit
from Vishnu's waist.

Let's strip off Tandy's dhoti
from Ekalavya's body,
and Satnami's langot
from Shambuk's bottom.

Let us all line up,
naked, in front of God,
stripped of our ego.
We must muster our courage
for it's not easy to be naked.

It is a hundred times
still more difficult
to strip off our surnames
from our names.

When we're able to do that
we may stand before God
in our nakedness
and pray to him:
Oh, God,
we offer you here,
in one single bowl,
all our surnames —
Mohapatra, Mohanty,
Tandy and Satnami.
Can you, in all fairness,
return these to us,
each his own surname,
by simply looking at our faces,
listening to our voices
and sampling our blood?

Then we will be grateful
for your godliness
and respect your
power of cognition.

Can you do that, God -
pick from the bowl
our respective surnames
and return them
each to his own?

Translated from the original Oriya

10

Body Purification

– Basudev Sunani

If you can, but once,
fix a bone in your tongue,
stand firm on the ground
and ask yourself:
Which Ganges can clean
my shit-smeared body?
How many stacks
of tulsi leaves
to sanctify me?
How many tons of sandalpaste
to deodorize my body?

How do I look
when I clean your sewer tank
taking out bucket loads
of faeces floating
on the water used
to clean your bottoms?

How do I look
when I swim breathless
in the water flowing

straight out of your latrines
to clean the sewer depths?

What do I look like when I pick up
the maggot infested mangy dog
to clean the street
so that your car
can have a smooth drive?
Once,
just one time,
guide the pupils of your eyes
towards the sun
and look at me,
and then only can you measure
the strength you have
within you.

Wherever I am
reeks of bad odour.
Your nose curls;
your mouth retches;
your eyes squirm.
But when I'm sick for a day,
your streets stay unswept;
the latrines choke;
hospitals groan
as patients go on a rampage.

Ask your grey cells
just once to explain
what Smriti, Purana,
Intelligence, Education mean.
I'm the one who handles shit
and eats his rice
with the same fingers;

and I'm the one
who knows the difference
between shit and rice.
Yet, I don't know
what Smriti, Purana,
Intelligence and Education are.

I've seen it all—
worms excreted from your innards,
snot and drivel
expelled from your mouth,
blood congealing
on your deathbed.

You may scoff and sneer at me,
but when I'm not around,
I know you have
a mental breakdown.

Fix a bone in your tongue
and tell me for once —
how much Ganges, tulsi
and sandal are needed
to purify and sanctify
my shit-smeared body.

Translated from the original Oriya

11

On the Edge

– Taslima Nasreen

Go ahead I must
though all my folk want me back;
My child pulls me by my sari,
My husband stops me by the door.
Go I must.
There is nothing before me,
only a river;
that I'll cross.
I know how to swim,
but they won't allow me
to swim and cross it.

There is nothing
beyond the river,
only an open field.
But then I want to touch
the void once.
I'll run against the wind.
I feel like dancing;
I must dance one day,
and then come back.

For a long time now,
I have not played
my childhood games.
I will play them one day
shouting to my heart's content,
and then I'll come back.

For a long time,
I have not cried
with my head in the lap
of loneliness;
I'll cry myself empty
and then I'll come back.

There is nothing before me;
only a river.
And I know how to swim.
Why shouldn't I go?
Go I must.

Translated from the original Bangla
(Published in *Manushi* 85, Nov-Dec 1994)

12

Enjoying a Woman

– Taslima Nasreen

On the third day
of our acquaintance,
you questioned the way
we should address each other.
After seven days,
you wanted to take me
to Madras, Bangalore,
Kathmandu and Calcutta.
On the eighteenth day,
you wanted to touch my fingers.
In two months
you demanded a kiss
and in three months and a half,
my body,
What all you'll get
in this beautiful body,
you will also get
in a full-time wife,
in half a dozen office girls
and in cheap harlots.
But then you go about
wearing down you reels,

talking nineteen to the dozen
trying to drag me
close to you, by deception.
All these translate into one thing;
Unless you enjoy a woman
after some tactical moves,
there is no satisfaction
in such enjoyment.

And since I know that,
before you can spit on my body.
I spit twice over
into your aberrant mind.

Translated from the original Bangla
(Published in *Manushi* 85, Nov-Dec 1994)

J.P. Das is an eminent poet, playwright, fiction writer and critic. His books, originally written in Oriya, have been widely translated into Hindi, English and other Indian languages; his plays have been performed in many languages in different parts of India. A Ph.D. in Art History, he has authored several books on Orissan art. He was a member of the Indian Administrative Service, but left it for full-time research and writing. He is a recipient of many honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman. Born in 1936 in Orissa, he lives and works in New Delhi.

Paul St-Pierre was Professor of Semiotics and Translation at the University of Montreal, Canada. He has collaborated on the translation of many Oriya literary works, including several books by J.P. Das, into English. He has co-edited books on the theory of translation, including *Changing the Terms* (with Sherry Simon) and *In Translation* (with P. C. Kar).

J.P. Das is the quintessential raconteur with an instinctive mastery of form.

– The Hindu

J.P. Das has now secured his place among the leading playwrights of the country.

– Enact

The world that Das creates is both magical and historical, lost and redeemed.

– Mary O'Connor

His poetry is universal as true poetry should be and ranks with some of the best in any language.

– Vassilis Vitsaxis

... an eminent writer of our time ... whose many-faceted career as a writer and art-historian spans nearly five decades.... His writings introduce the readers to a sensibility shaped by explorations of diverse worlds of experience and variety of literary forms.

– Jatindra K. Nayak

Dr. Das deserves our praise for bringing Orissa's art and literature to the attention of the world.

– Harekrushna Mahtab